Michael Coney & Eric Brown

Colin P. Davies

Neal Asher

Josh Lacey

Charles Stross

SPECTRUM SF 8

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SERIAL

THE ATROCITY ARCHIVE 44 CHARLES STROSS

NOVELETTE

SNOW IN THE DESERT 16 NEAL ASHER
THE TREES OF TERPSICHORE THREE 119 MICHAEL CONEY & ERIC BROWN

SHORT STORIES

TALL TALES ON THE IRON HORSE 4 COLIN P. DAVIES
A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES 102 JOSH LACEY

NON-FICTION

INFORMATION 2
EDITORIAL 3
BACK ISSUES 15
ABOUT THE COVER 43
BACK ISSUES 118
THE ARCHIVE 152
LETTERS 188
COMING SOON 192

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Editorial

Once again, I extend my apologies to our readers for another tardy issue. The reasons for this were multiple, as ever, and I will not strain your patience further by listing them. I would ask, however, for four other offences to be taken into consideration, M'Lud.

On a more serious note, the next issue should be out in late June, just a couple of months or so after this one. At the moment that issue is fairly well advanced: the final part of the serial and a novelette by Eric Brown will be typeset by the time you read this.

Which leads me neatly to the other bad news this issue. It proved, for reasons of length, unwise to complete Charles Stross's serial this time around (it would have seriously unbalanced this number). So the final part will appear next issue. My genuine apologies for this: if you really can't wait for the ending, drop me a line and I *may* be able to send you a proof copy of part three. No promises though, and this offer is open to subscribers only (there have to be some perks).

Till next time...

Paul Fraser
Editor & Publisher

Colin P. Davies has sold fiction professionally both outside and inside the SF field and is currently working on a comic novel for young adults. This story, like David Redd's SOLUS *(appearing in* SPECTRUM SF *soon), was workshopped at Milford, an annual writing seminar held in the UK.*

TALL TALES ON THE IRON HORSE

COLIN P. DAVIES

Two kilometres inland from the equatorial Sumatran port of Padang the train turns sharply, plunges into the mountain, and clatters down through a darkness relieved only by the occasional glimmer of St Elmo's fire, finally emerging, after three days by the clock, into the icy, orange daylight of Saturn's moon, Titan.

At least, that's what Gillian said.

I'd sat silently opposite the large, chattering woman for far too long when I eventually decided to speak. "Historical facts and figures are indigestible… hence the saying, 'History repeats itself'." I stroked my beak-like nose (I have no illusions about anything anymore).

She smiled, apparently relieved. "My name is Gillian." Ringlets of black hair obscured her eyes, but a sparkle of mischief escaped.

"So you said."

Three days to go.

The train had just entered the tunnel. Beyond the windows, nothing could be seen. We rocked and rattled, always downhill.

"You're a teacher then, Mr Hanover?" Gillian had one of those hurried voices which always sound breathless, as if it took a major effort to hold back the next flurry of words.

I nodded. "History."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Yes, apart from the kids."

"I did a bit of teaching."

"Before you became a talker?"

She shifted in her seat, sweeping up her huge, ruby silk skirt so that it settled across my knees. "I've always been a talker," she said. "Science.

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I used to teach science, in the broadest and most basic terms possible."

I nodded. "I wish I could understand that sort of thing. Like this train. To me it's just magic."

She laughed, revealing ruby implants in alternate teeth. "If I was a real bore, I'd explain exactly how all this works. But I'm not and I won't."

I nodded.

"At least not now."

The Manchester hotel pool that morning had been as cool and sharp as a revelation. The vodkas of the night before had only obscured the truth, strung a thin net across the void. Now I plunged in. Mary… Mary! She was gone. Everything was gone. Everything. Her call from Australia left no doubt. She was looking for God.

I slipped below the surface. The guts of the hotel rumbled in my ears. Could I drown myself? No, I hadn't the courage… if that was what it took. I surfaced, spat water.

I'd take the suborbital to Sydney – track Ortega down. It was all I could do for Mary now.

"I don't consider origami to be a survival skill," I said.

Gillian tossed the newly made paper cup into my lap. "It'll hold water."

"Which is more than can be said for your story."

"Many passengers have a problem with that story – the animated paper doll of Chez Malloy. I suppose I can't blame them. I mean, what sort of name is that for a hotel anyway! I should have stayed at the Titan Imperial. I did meet him though… Angus Malloy. We didn't have relations, but I did licence him into my virtual world. When I left him, his eyes were glazed and his face held a huge grin. I suppose I was flattered."

"So he'd smuggled the doll into your luggage," I said. "Look…" I stroked my nose. "The paper doll crawling out of your bag I can live with. The doll rampaging around this carriage doesn't upset me overmuch. Even the part about it having your face doesn't quite stretch credibility to breaking point." I sat back in my soft seat. "But don't tell me Malloy powered it by harnessing the latent energy contained in paper folds. That's pure bull!"

She struggled to her feet. Her skirt rustled like pigs in the under-

growth. "I'm going to the dining car," she said, a little haughtily. "I suggest you follow." Then she left.

We walked down the centre of the next carriage, Gillian in the lead, squeezing down the narrow aisle, both hips brushing the seats. I tried not to tread on her skirt. The chatter was oppressive; lots of passengers, a talker with each. The rocking of the train made it hard to keep to a straight line and I had to clutch at the seats. The track clatter seemed louder in here.

For the first time I noticed the oddly empty luggage racks, and the garish wall posters proclaiming the latest participation-simulation movies. The only limit is your own imagination. Smellovision and Toucharama, neural triggers: why live in the real world, I thought, when you can immerse yourself in a controlled dream?

That thought was somehow important, I was certain. But my attempts to conceptualise beyond the confined world of this train left me with nothing – hands grasping at fog.

"So what happened with the doll?" I asked as we passed through into the dining car.

"Didn't I tell you?"

"No."

She glanced back at me. "I refolded it into an airplane and slipped it out through a window, while we were still in the tunnel. Set off all sorts of alarms and earned me a fine. You should have seen the fireworks. I got my fingers singed. But the plane survived and somehow limped home."

"The plane *limped* home?"

"Malloy was very surprised. He'd intended it to be a gift."

I laughed – what else could I do? "You tell a good story."

She winked at me. "Telling stories is my business."

"It isn't that I don't understand your pain," the Reverend Ortega had said. He sipped his blue vermouth. "It's simply that I don't care." A constellation of chandeliers glimmered on his polished skull.

I stood beside his dining table in the exclusive Ocean Tapestry restaurant in Sydney. My body was trembling. I wanted to kill him. The bald girl sitting opposite him giggled into her hands.

My fingers were flexing as I imagined them around his neck. But while there was the slightest chance I could still help Mary, I could not let my anger off the leash.

"I don't believe that Mary knew what she was doing," I said. "She was sick."

"She was depressed," the Reverend said. "She'd just lost her business empire."

"She owned three shops!"

He sipped at his drink again. "It's not unusual for people to turn to God at these times."

"The Mary I knew didn't even believe in God. She needed medical help… and you took advantage of her."

He shrugged. "Speak to my lawyer. Besides, where were you when she needed this help?"

"You're a fraud, and a murderer!"

"That's slanderous. I've got a witness."

I snatched up the girl's glass and tossed red wine into his face. He sprang to his feet. I thought he was going to lose control. Then the momentary lines of fury were gone from his face and his skin regained its unblemished smooth superiority. He dabbed himself clean with a napkin.

I was grabbed from behind by two men and hauled outside into the cold rain. They dumped me on the kerbside.

I sat and steamed for fifteen minutes, then caught a cab.

Again I sat opposite Gillian. The table between us held a 3D image of Saturn as viewed from the Holiday Inn on Titan. Closer examination revealed an improbable train circumnavigating the rings every five seconds.

"*The Flying Scotsman*, a mythical engine," Gillian said. "Here's our coffees."

"I didn't order any."

An autotrolley pulled up beside the table. Gillian transferred two full mugs to Saturn's flattened pole. "I always get coffee."

"So what's next?"

"Next?"

"Your next story." I tried the coffee. It was too hot and too strong. "Or are you going to let me sleep?"

"You know better than that."

I wiped coffee from my moustache with a finger. The hot liquid made me more aware that I was feeling warm already, in spite of the cool air blowing around my ankles from the under-seat ventilator.

Gillian slurped from her mug, then smiled. "Three days isn't so long to stay awake."

"It's one Hell of a lot of stories."

"We're travelling on the principle of suspension of disbelief – a time-honoured method of empowering the imagination. It's a talker's job to maintain the fictional aura, and to stop you sleeping."

"You said you weren't going to explain."

"Sorry… was that an explanation?"

"I told you I'm not good at science."

Gillian pulled the ringlets of hair from her eyes. "As I understand it, the train is enfolded in a field wherein the suppression of disbelief charms the pants off all the quarks which, in their excitement, jump about with their tachyons spinning so fast that their watches go backwards and then they party all night until it's time to feed Schrödinger's cat. Makes an odd kind of sense, don't you think?"

I rubbed my forehead. I'd never noticed how the veins stood out before. "Could you stop talking?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Well then, let's talk about something else. Have you ever been to Europe?"

"Funny you should ask that…"

The sun had been rising when I'd spotted the Reverend Ortega finally arriving back at his apartment – a penthouse above the temple. His MG Micro soft-top hissed to a halt before the temple doors. He emerged alone, clattered up the steel staircase and went inside.

I remained on the bench where I'd spent the cold night. I felt too brittle to get up.

Just one minute ago the sun had crested the dockside Herald building and was now in my eyes. I stroked the black cat which had joined me during the night and slowly began to thaw.

I'd never been the bravest of men, but I knew I had to go through with this. Mary deserved my best shot. If she hadn't fallen for the young man she saw regularly at the Retrospective Commune – if she hadn't smuggled me out in her bakery truck – I'd still be living in the past.

She'd paid for the mind-flushing drugs and got me a post at the regional sub-university. I owed her everything, and repaid her by shutting her out as I succumbed to obsessive research disorder. I could

not expect her to understand. History had been in control of me… but now I was controlling History. She'd been gone forty-eight hours before I even noticed.

The cat shrugged away my hand and jumped to the ground.

Yes… It was time to save Mary.

"'You can't just lope in here and make cheese!' And with that, Carlo picked up the cleaver and ended the short and unique career of Angus, the Chimpanzee Chef." Gillian sank back into her skirt.

I sipped my coffee. It was cold. "How about if I just promise to stay awake?"

"Try to enjoy it."

"I read a lot of fiction when I was younger, but then real life began to intrude."

"We try not to think about real life on the train," she said. "We, the talkers, call it *The Lying Scotsman*."

"Tell me something," I said – I examined her face. Would she give me a straight answer? "Have you heard of the Church of the Busy God?"

She frowned. "I've heard it mentioned."

"What do you know?"

"I know they tell better stories than mine."

I fumbled in my jacket pocket and pulled out a pair of heavy-framed spectacles. I put them on.

"Antiques, eh?" She laughed. "Admit it! You like playing the part of the History Professor."

"I like being able to read."

I took a brochure from my pocket. *TITAN – A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE*. "Does that sound like Titan to you?" I asked.

"I've only stayed at the hotels… taken in the usual sights."

The autotrolley returned to collect the mugs. It scooted off leaving behind a tinny 'thankyou' and a faint odour of creosote.

I rubbed my nose. "So you've eaten the Infinite Alien? The sentient fungus that's the size of a cathedral?"

"Me? No, no… I don't even like mushrooms."

I smirked. "Doesn't that make you a bit of a fraud? All these stories, supposed adventures, and yet you've avoided the most unusual and bizarre experience of all. Communion with the unhuman. To eat alien flesh." I shook my head. "Don't you feel bad?"

She sighed and smoothed out her skirt. "My sins pain me, but only slightly, like grazed knees."

I felt a little sorry for her. "Tell me another story."

She brightened. "At first, this one didn't look like much of a story – just an advertisement I spotted in a newspaper: *Erstwhile Saviours Wanted: Immortality an Advantage.*"

I felt an odd sort of satisfaction. I'd put her on the spot, which was ungentlemanly of me. I felt a responsibility for her. Silly, I knew. But I tend to gather responsibilities like a hypochondriac gathers medicines. I blame my mother, for putting me in charge of the chickens.

Mary had understood me, but I'd let her down. I'd completely, unquestionably, and fatally failed to understand her.

The temple doors had loomed over me as I'd climbed the wide steps. I found a small white button labelled press. I did just that. To the hiss of compressed air, the doors swung open. Cautiously, I went forward into the dark. The doors closed and immediately a light flared above me. "You are being scanned for weapons," a soft, automated voice said. I noticed a door directly ahead of me.

"You are being scanned for malice."

Malice! I had my fill of that. It seemed I would get no further. Then the door ahead of me swung open.

"You are obsessed by hatred," the voice told me – as if I didn't already know. "But there is no malice towards the saints. You may enter, and we pray you find peace here amongst the peaceful ones."

The light over my head died and I hurried through into a harshly lit hall. My footsteps echoed as I walked over the stained polished concrete.

The place must have previously been a warehouse. The painted walls still displayed scars from stripped-out shelving. Sunlight seeped around makeshift boarding over the high-level windows. From the smell it was clear it had been used to store creosote, back in the recent days before nanotechnology had killed off the wood preservation market.

The hall ahead of me was packed with people, yet no one moved. No one made a sound. They stood as statues – long white robes, relaxed poses and Godward eyes, smiling in sure knowledge of the rapture to come.

Their robes swayed gently as I walked amongst them.

The air was cool in here, circulated by scattered portable fan units at floor level. There must have been a hundred people. I felt awe and revulsion. Was this the pinnacle of the new nanotechnology? To maintain the human body in a living death? To service and repair while the lonely soul waits to be scooped up by a busy God's once-a-century trawl – a God who might overlook them should they be anything other than perfectly still.

What was going on behind their eyes? Were they dreaming, or thinking?

This tall woman with black hair. What might she have been? Or have become? The young man with freckles. Why was he here? Did he need to run away from life? And this small woman… Not young, not even beautiful in the media sense, but she was beautiful to me.

This was Mary.

"I'm not saying the glasses make you look unattractive," Gillian said. "I'm saying they make you look like Groucho Marx. It's in the eye of the beholder."

I returned the glasses to my pocket and sat back.

The train clattered and rocked. For a while I let the rhythm flow through me, comforting, soothing. I attempted not to hear Gillian.

An age had dragged by since we'd come back from the dining car and hunger was beginning to prod at my stomach again. I yawned.

"You can cut that out," said Gillian. Then she laughed. It was an attractive laugh, comfortable and chubby.

"I think I'd better eat," I said.

My attention was caught by a disturbance further up the carriage. People were standing. Chatter became whispers became weeping.

Someone had fallen asleep.

Gillian got to her feet – surprisingly fast, I thought. "You'll want to see this," she said. She parted the crowd as easily as a knife cuts gateau. I followed.

A steward in a blue lycra uniform reached the incident first. "How could you let it happen, Algie? Did you stop talking? This'll finish you for sure. You'll be redesigned." He tugged at his own hair. "Why on my shift? Why?"

A seated young man was sobbing.

Gillian grabbed my shoulder and pushed me through between the onlookers. "Look at the other seat!"

The seat opposite him was unoccupied, but my gaze was drawn to the dark window where my own reflection looked back at me. I could also see Gillian, and all the others… and one more.

In the reflection of the unoccupied seat, a grey-haired woman dozed. She was there in the glass. I could see her. Yet here in the carriage she did not exist.

"Now you see why we talk." Gillian wrapped her heavy arm around my shoulders and guided me back to my seat. "She won't be coming back. That's just a memory, and memories don't last."

"Okay," I said. "Feel free to explain, now."

She pressed a finger to my lips. "I remember my mother used to say, 'If you observe the impossible, then it's quite clearly not impossible'."

I gave her what I hoped was a blank look.

"I know…" she said. "Lovely woman, but daft as a wax coffee-spoon." Gillian settled herself in her seat. "She wasn't always like that though. As a teenager she was hard and hard-faced – the leader of a gang of sorts. She carried a knife and sharpened her wit on the younger boys. Mind you, they bore it happily. They didn't understand most of it and, besides, the girl had breasts!"

As she talked, her words became background distraction. I was struggling to retrieve a memory, a hazy image of a place and events so much more solid than this. There had been a woman and pain… Unbelievable pain.

I tried to get comfortable, but not too comfortable. I knew I had to hang onto this precarious reality. Sleeping now seemed too easy and too frightening.

"There are two ways of looking at anything, Mr Hanover," The Reverend had stepped out into my view. "Eyes open, or eyes closed."

I slumped to my knees. I felt weak, useless. "She is dead, isn't she? This is… death?"

"Open your eyes, Mr Hanover. This is only a means of transportation. No, she's not dead. She's sharing a communal vision. It's how we keep the mind active and maintain sanity."

"So she's asleep?"

"No. The nanomachines can't handle sleep. They're basically stupid… just machines. They mistake sleep for brain death and close down maintenance functions."

He moved closer. I got to my feet.

"Your Mary has not yet reached her destination."

"Where is that? Titan? Isn't that what you believe? That God is on Titan?"

"God travels throughout the universe, Mr Hanover. However, it's true that we have seen His face on Titan."

"The famous picture from the probe!"

"The spacecraft was only a messenger."

"I've seen that picture. Cloud patterns, that's all. Freak cloud patterns."

"Those eyes are closed again, Mr Hanover. Look at your wife."

I examined her face. Her eyes gazed, but she did not see. On one of her perfect cheeks I saw a dark smudge, like a fingerprint. I shuddered at the thought of Ortega touching her. I rubbed at the mark gently with my thumb. Her skin was warm. "...the heat?"

"The little machines work hard – they generate heat."

Tears hazed my eyesight. "And how long can your nanomedics keep her preserved?"

"They're not exactly medics – more like travelling companions."

"How long?"

"Indefinitely... or until she's spotted by God."

"The Busy God."

"Not too busy for those who prepare themselves, who are waiting when he glances our way."

"History repeating itself again. Why can't I escape from History? How many have to be slaughtered this time in the name of Religion?"

Ortega gestured towards the rigid figure of a young girl. "Does she look slaughtered to you?"

"You could wait a hundred years to be spotted. Isn't that what you preach? Has even a single person been taken yet by God?"

"Patience is a virtue."

"No, staying alive is a virtue. Now, will you release Mary?"

His silence was my answer. I stepped towards him; he backed away. "I'm going to take her to the hospital," I said.

He shook his head.

"And if you try to stop me... I'll kill you."

"I've no doubt that you would."

I positioned myself between him and Mary, turned, took her firmly by the shoulders.

"But you're not going to the hospital, Mr Hanover. You're going to God. The machines are already in your blood."

I heard his words, but they seemed to draw out, deepen… blend into a drawl. Time stretched. The smudge… I tried to turn. Nothing happened. Then there was movement, but so slow. My thoughts struggled for speed, for clarity. Pain began above my eyes, burned down my face, and boiled along my veins. I tried to open my mouth, needed to cry out, could see I had lost balance. The floor was floating up towards my face. I ordered my hands to rise to cushion my fall…

I heard a distant slow voice.

"Mr Hanover. Your eyes are closed."

I jerked alert. I'd nearly dozed then.

"It wasn't that my mother was a difficult child," Gillian said. "It was just that she was difficult to find. She liked to travel."

I was getting a headache.

"By the age of fourteen, she was travelling all over Europe, usually by train."

"Wasn't that dangerous at only fourteen?"

"She was taller than I am and had muscle where I've got… ballast. But she wasn't all brawn. No, by no means. She believed it was vital, while travelling great distances, to keep the mind occupied. That was how she came to be a talker. She could talk to people for hours, for days. She'd go without sleep for…"

But I was no longer hearing Gillian. I was remembering a hall and a priest and a woman so beautiful…

"She came to believe that sleep and death were the same."

… and a hatred so corrupting that even love could not be saved.

My head was pounding. "How long till we reach Titan?"

"Nearly three days."

The clatter of the coach was a sharp pain in my forehead.

"Three days? How long since we entered the tunnel?" I asked. Panic closed upon my throat.

Gillian pointed a finger across the aisle at a wall-clock I'd not noticed before.

"…five minutes."

And now the first day has finally, grudgingly passed and I feel so, so much older. Gillian has gone. She walked off while I was

theorizing on the nature of time. I suspect I was beginning to like her – becoming too comfortable. Her effectiveness had diminished.

A new talker has joined me now – a grey-haired stick of a man with a faith in the good sense of mankind which sets my teeth on edge.

I can't face another minute with him.

I hope God spots me soon. ●

Back Issues

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Spectrum SF #1

Drek Yarman – Keith Roberts (part 1). Great Wall of Mars – Alastair Reynolds. Bear Trap – Charles Stross. Mind's Eye – Keith Brooke & Eric Brown. Bonsai Tiger – Garry Kilworth. Plus Non-Fiction.

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Neal Asher has had an extensive career in the small press, where he has published many short stories, several novellas and three short story collections, THE ENGINEER, RUNCIBLE TALES and MASON'S RATS. Some of this work can be found at www.website.lineone.net/~nealasher.
His first full-length novel, GRIDLINKED was recently published by Macmillan. Another novel in the same universe, THE SKINNER, is due out in March this year (and is reviewed in THE ARCHIVE). He has just finished a third, THE LINE OF POLITY.

SNOW IN THE DESERT
NEAL ASHER

A sand shark broke through the top of the dune, only to be snatched by a crab-bird and shredded in mid-air. Hirald squatted down, wrapping her cloak around her and pulling up the hood. The chameleon cloth shaded to match the violet sand, leaving only her Toshiba goggles and the blunt snout of her singun visible. It was a small crab bird, but she had quickly learnt never to underestimate them. Should the prey be too large for it to kill, the bird would take pieces instead. No motile source of protein was too large to attack. The shame was that all the life-forms on Vatch were based on non-Terran proteins, so to a crab-bird, human flesh was completely without nourishment.

The bird stripped the shark of its blade-legs and armoured mandibles and flew off with the bleeding and writhing torso, probably to feed to its chick. Hirald stood up and reappeared; a tall woman in a tight-fitting body-suit, webbed with cooling veins and hung with insulated pockets. On her back she carried a desert survival pack, to create the right impression. Likewise, the formidable singun went into a button-down holster that looked as if it might hold only a simple projectile weapon. She removed her goggles and mask, tucking them away in one of her many pockets before moving on across the sand. Her thin features, blue eyes, and long blonde hair were exposed to oven temperatures and skin-flaying ultraviolet. So it had been for many weeks now. Occasionally she drank some water, just in case someone was watching.

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He was called, inevitably, Snow, but with his mask and dust robes it was not immediately evident that he was an albino. The mask, made from the shell of a terrapin, was what identified him. That, and a tendency to leave corpses behind. The current reward for his stasis-preserved testicles was twenty thousand shillings, or the equivalent value in copper or manganese or other precious metals. Many had tried for that reward, and such was their epitaph: they tried.

Snow understood that there might be bounty-hunters waiting at the water station. They would have weapons, strength, and skill. Balanced against this was the crippling honour code of the Andronache. Snow had all the former and none of the latter. Born on Earth so long ago that he doubted his memories, he had long since dispensed with anything that might impede his survival. Morality, he often argued, is a purely human invention, only to be indulged in times of plenty. Another of his little aphorisms ran something along the lines of: 'If you're up Shit Creek without a paddle, don't expect the coastguard.' His contemporaries on Vatch never knew what to make of that one, unsurprisingly as Vatchians had no use for words like *creek, paddle* or *coast*.

The station was a metallic ovoid mounted ten metres above the ground on a forest of scaffolding. Nailing it to the ground was the silvery tube of the geothermal energy tap that powered the transmuter – which made it possible for humans to exist on this practically waterless planet. The transmuter took complex compounds, stripped them of their elementary hydrogen, and combined that with the abundant oxygen given off by the dryform algae that turned all the sands of Vatch violet. Water was the product, but there were many interesting by-products: rare metals and strange silica compounds were among the planet's main exports.

As he topped the final dune Snow raised his image-intensifier and scanned ahead. The station was truly a small city, the centre of commerce, the centre of life. He frowned under his mask. Unfortunately, he needed water for the last stage of his journey, and this was the only place he could get it.

Snow strode down the face of the dune to where a dusty track snaked towards the station. By the roadside a water-thief lay dying at the bottom of a condensation jar. His blistered fingers scratched at the hot glass. Snow passed by, ignoring him. It was a harsh punishment, but how else to treat someone who regarded his fellow human beings as

no more than walking water-flasks? As he neared the station, cries from the rookery of hawkers and stall-holders in the ground city reached out to him, and he could see the buzz of activity in the scaffold maze. Soon he entered the noisy life of the ground city; a little after that he passed through the moisture lock of the Sand House.

A waiter spoke to Snow, "My pardon, master. I must see your tag. The Androche herself has declared the law enforceable by a two-month branding. The word is that too many outlaws now survive on the fringe." The man could not help staring at Snow's pink eyes and bloodless face.

"No problem, friend." Snow fumbled through his robes to produce his micro-etched identity tag and handed it over. The waiter glanced at the briefly revealed leather-clad stump that terminated Snow's left arm, and pretended not to notice. He put the tag through his portable reader and was much relieved when no alarm sounded. Snow was well aware that not everyone was checked like this, only the more suspicious-looking customers.

"What would you like, master?"

"A litre of chilled lager."

The waiter looked at him doubtfully.

"Which I will pay for now," Snow added, handing over a ten shilling note. The waiter, obviously alarmed at such a large sum in cash, hurried off with it as quickly as he could. Many eyes followed his progress when he returned with a litre of lager in a thermos stein with combination-locked top, for here was an indication of wealth.

Snow would not have agreed. He had worked it out. A litre of water would have cost only two shillings less, and the water lost through sweat evaporation little different. Two shillings, plus a little, for imbibing fluid in a much more pleasant form.

He had nearly finished his litre and was relishing the sheer cellular pleasure of rehydration when the three entered the Sand House. He recognised them as killers immediately, but before paying the slightest attention to them he drained every last drop of lager from the frictionless vessel.

"You are Snow, the albino," the first said, standing before his table. Snow observed her and felt a leaden inevitability. Even after all these years he could not shake his aversion to killing women – or this time, young girls. She could not have been more than twenty. She stood before him attired in monofilament coveralls and weapons harness. Her

face was elfin under a head of cropped, black hair spiked out with gold-fleck grease.

"No, I'm not," he said, and turned his attention elsewhere.

"Don't fuck with me," she said with a tiredness beyond her years. "I know who you are. You are an albino and your left hand is missing."

He returned his attention to her. "My name is Jelda Conley. People call me Whitey. I have often been confused with this Snow you refer to, and it was on one such occasion that I lost my hand. Now please leave me alone."

The girl stepped back, confused. The Andronache honour code did not allow for creative lying. Snow glanced past her and noted one of her companions speaking to the owner, who had sent the nervous waiter over. The lies would not be enough. He watched while the owner called over the waiter and checked the screen of his tag reader. The companion approached the girl, whispered in her ear.

"You lied to me," she said.

"No I didn't."

"Yes you did!"

This was getting ridiculous. Snow stared off into the distance and ignored her.

"I challenge you," the girl said.

There, it was said. Snow pretended he had not heard her.

"I said, 'I challenge you!'."

By the code she could now kill him. It was against the law but accepted practice. Snow felt a sinking sensation as she stepped back.

"Stand and face me, coward."

With a tiredness that was wholly genuine Snow rose to his feet. She snatched her slammer. Snow reacted. She hit the floor on her back, the front of her monofilament coverall punctured and a smoking hole between her pert little breasts. Snow stepped past the table, past her, and was almost at the moisture lock before anyone could react.

It rested on the violet sands at the edge of a spaceport, which was scattered with huge flying-wing shuttles, outbuildings and hangars. It stood between the spaceport and the sprawl of Vatchian buildings linked by moisture-sealed walkways and the glass domes that covered the incongruous green of the parks. And in no way did it resemble any of the structures around it. It could be found on a thousand planets of

the human Polity, and it was the reason for the spread of the human race across the galaxy.

The runcible facility was a mirrored sphere fifty metres across, seemingly prevented from rolling away by two L-shaped buffers to either side. All around it, the glass-roofed embarkation lounges were puddles of light. Within the sphere, the Skaidon gate performed its miracle every few minutes: bringing in quince–mitter travellers from all across the polity, and sending them away again.

Beck stood back from the arrivals' entrance and through it watched the twin horns of the runcible on its dais of black glass. He watched the shimmer of the cusp between those horns and impatiently checked his watch, not that they could be late – or early. They would arrive on the nanosecond. The runcible AI would see to that. Precisely on time a man stepped through the shimmer, a woman, another man, another woman. They matched the descriptions he had been given, and his greeting was effusive as they came through to the lounge.

"Your transport awaits outside," he told them, hurrying them to exit. Beck's employer did not want them to stay in the city. He wanted them out, those were Beck's instructions; amongst others. Once they were in the hover transport, the man he took to be the leader caught hold of his shoulder.

"The weapons," he said.

"Not here, not here," Beck said nervously, and took the transport out of the city.

Out on the sand Beck brought the transport down. Once the four climbed out, he joined them at the back of the vehicle, from which he took a large case. He was sweating, and not just from the heat.

"Here," he said, opening the case.

The man reached inside and took out a small, shiny pistol, snub-nosed and deadly-looking.

"The merchant will meet you at the pre-arranged place, if he manages to obtain the information he seeks," Beck said. He did not know where that was, nor what the information was. The merchant had not taken him that far into his trust. It surprised him that he had been allowed even the knowledge that hired killers were on Vatch.

The man nodded as he inspected the pistol, smiled sadly, then pointed the pistol at Beck.

"Sorry," he said.

Beck tried to say something just as he became aware of the arm

coming round his face from the man who had moved behind him. A grip like iron closed around his head, locked, wrenched and twisted. Beck hit the sand with his head at an angle it had never achieved in life. He made some choking sounds, shivered a little, died.

Snow halted as two proctors came in through the lock. They stared past him to the corpse on the floor. The elder of the two, grey-bearded and running to fat, but with weapons that appeared well-used and well looked-after, spoke to him.

"You are Snow," he said.

"Yes," Snow replied. This man was not Andronache.

"A challenge?"

"Yes."

The man nodded, assessed the two Andronache at the bar, then turned back to the moisture lock. It was not his job to pick up the corpses. There was an organisation for that. The girl would be in a condensation jar within the hour.

"The Androche would speak with you. Come with me." To his companion he said, "Deal with it. Her two friends look like they ought to spend a little time in detention."

Snow followed the man outside.

"Why does she want to see me?" he asked as they strode down the scaffolded street.

"I didn't ask."

Conversation ended there.

The Androche, like all in her position, had apartments in the station she owned. The proctor led Snow to a caged spiral stair and unlocked the gate. "She is above."

As Snow climbed the stair the gate clanged shut behind him.

The stairway ended at a moisture-lock hatch next to which depended a monitor and screen unit. Snow pressed the call button and waited. After a few moments a woman with cropped, grey hair and a face that was all hard angles peered out at him.

"Yes?"

"You sent for me."

The woman nodded and the lock on the hatch clunked open. After spinning the handle Snow stepped back as the hatch rose on its hinge to allow him access. He climbed into a short, metal-walled corridor that ended at a single panel door of imported wood. It

looked like oak to Snow – very expensive. Pushing the door open, he entered.

The room was filled with a fortune in antiques: a huge dining table surrounded by gate-leg chairs; plush eighteenth-century furniture; oil paintings on the walls; hand-woven rugs on the floor.

"Don't be too impressed. They're all copies."

The Androche approached from a drinks cabinet carrying two glasses half filled with an amber drink. Snow studied her. She was an attractive woman. He estimated her age as somewhere between thirty-five and a hundred and ninety. She wore a simple toga-type dress over an athletic figure, and at her hip she carried an antique – or replica – revolver.

"You know *my* name," Snow observed as he accepted the drink.

"I am Aleen," she replied.

Snow hardly heard her. He was relishing his first sip.

"My God, whisky," he said, eventually.

"Yes," Aleen acknowledged, before gesturing to a nearby sofa. They moved there and sat facing each other.

"Well, I'm here. What do you want?"

"Why is there a reward of twenty-five thousand shillings for your testicles?"

"Best ask Merchant Baris that question. But I see it was rhetorical. You already know the answer."

Aleen nodded.

Snow leant towards her. "I would be glad to know that answer too," he admitted.

Aleen smiled, Snow leant back, annoyed.

"There is a price," he said flatly.

"Isn't there always? There is a man. He is the Chief Proctor here. His name is David Songrel."

"You want me to kill him."

"Of course. Isn't that what you are best at?"

Snow kept silent as Aleen lay back against the edge of the sofa then regarded him over her drink. "That is not all I want from you."

He turned and gazed at her and at that moment she lifted her feet up onto the sofa so that he could see that she wore nothing under the dress. *Does she shave*, Snow wondered, *or is she naturally hairless there?* He also wondered what it was that turned her on: his white body and pink eyes? Other women had said it was almost like being made love

to by an alien. Or was it that he was a killer? Probably a bit of both.

"Part of the price?"

She nodded and set her glass to one side, then she slid closer to him on the sofa and hooked one leg over the back of it.

"Now," she said, reaching up and opening her toga to display breasts just like those of the girl he had killed. Snow searched himself for an adverse reaction to that; finding none, he stood up and unclipped his dust robes.

"You're white as paper," Aleen said in amazement as he peeled off his undersuit, but when her eyes strayed to the covered stump terminating his left arm, she made no comment.

"Yes," Snow agreed as he knelt between her legs and bowed down to run his tongue round her nipples. "A blank page," he went on as he worked his way down. She caught his head.

"Not that," she said. "I want you inside me, now."

Snow obliged her, but was puzzled at something he had heard in her voice. No love-making then: just the act itself. Perhaps she wanted white-skinned children.

Hirald called out before approaching the fire. It had been her observation that the Andronache got rather twitchy if you walked into one of their camps unannounced. As she walked in she was surprised to see that these weren't locals. Hirald noted two men and two women wearing monofilament survival suits that looked to be of Martian manufacture. She also pretended not to notice the weapons that one of the men had hastily covered on her arrival. She walked to the fire and squatted down. One of the women tossed on another crab-bird carapace and watched her through the flames.

The man who had covered the weapons, a tall Marsman with caste markings tattooed on his temples, was the first to speak. "You've come a long way?" he asked.

"Not so far as you," Hirald said. She looked from him across the flames to the woman. Her face also bore caste marks. The other couple were a black man with incongruous blue eyes, and a woman who had caps over the neural plugs behind her ears. *She* was corporate then – from one of The Families.

Hirald went on, "But why have you come here, I wonder?"

"We search," the black said intently. "Perhaps you can help us. We search for one who is called Snow. He is an albino."

They all stared at Hirald.

"I have heard of him," Hirald said, "and I have heard that many people look for him. I do not know where he is though."

The woman with the neural plugs looked suspicious. Hirald quickly asked, "You are after the reward, then?"

The four glanced to each other, then the Marsman smiled to himself and casually reached for one of the covered weapons beside him. Hirald glanced at the Corporate woman, who stared back at her.

"Jharit, no."

Jharit stopped with his hand by the covering. "What is it, Canard Meck?"

The woman, now identified as a member of the Jethro Manx Canard Corporate Family, slowly shook her head, still staring at Hirald.

"We have no dispute with you," she said. "But we would prefer it if you left our camp, please."

"She might tell him," Jharit protested.

Canard Meck glanced to him and said, "She is product."

Jharit snatched his hand from the weapons and suddenly looked very frightened. He flinched as Hirald rose to her feet. Hirald smiled.

"I mean no harm, unless harm is meant."

She strode out into the darkness without checking behind. No one moved. No one reached for the weapons.

Snow removed the pistol from its holster in his dust robes and checked the charge reading. As was usual it was nearly full. The bright sunlight of Vatch acting on the photo-voltaic material of his robes kept the weapon constantly powered up through the socket in the holster. The weapon was a matt black L, five millimetres thick with only a slight depression where a trigger would normally have been. It was keyed to Snow. No one else could fire it. Rather than firing projectiles, as did most weapons on Vatch, this weapon discharged a beam of field-accelerated protons, but they could still make large holes in anyone Snow cared to point it at.

David Songrel was a family man. Snow had observed him lifting a child high in the air while a woman looked on. Snow wondered why Aleen wanted him dead. As the owner of the water station she had power here, but little influence over the proctors who enforced planetary law. Perhaps she had been involved in illegalities of which Songrel had become aware. No matter, for the present. He rapped on

the door and when Songrel opened it he stuck the pistol in the man's face and walked him back into the apartment, closing the door behind him with his stump.

"Daddy!" the little girl yelled, but the mother caught hold of her before she rushed forward. Songrel had his hands in the air, his eyes not leaving the pistol. Shock there, knowledge.

"Why," said Snow, "does the Androche want you dead?"

"You're… the albino."

"Answer the question please."

Songrel glanced at his wife and daughter before he replied, "She is a collector of antiquities."

"Why the necessity for your death?"

"She has killed to get what she wants. I have evidence. We intend to arrest her soon."

Snow nodded then holstered his pistol. "I thought it would be something like that. She had two proctors come for me, you know."

Songrel lowered his hands, but kept them well away from the stun gun hooked on his belt. "As Androche she has the right to some use of the proctors. It is our duty to guard her and her property. She does not have the freedom to commit crime. Why didn't you kill me? They say you have killed many."

Snow glanced at Songrel's wife and child. "My reputation precedes me," he said, and stepped past Songrel to drop onto a comfortable sofa. "But the stories are in error. I have killed no one who has not first tried to kill me… well, mostly."

Songrel turned to his wife. "It's Tamtha's bedtime."

His wife nodded and took the child from the room. Snow noted the little girl's fascinated stare. He was used to it. Songrel sat down in an armchair opposite Snow.

"You have a nice family."

"Yes… will you testify against the Androche?"

"You can have my testimony recorded under seal, but I cannot stay for a trial. Were I to stay this place would be crawling with Andronache killers in no time. I might not survive that."

Songrel nodded. "Why did you come here if it was not your intention to kill me?" he asked, a trifle anxiously.

"I want you to play dead while I go back and see the Androche."

Songrel's expression hardened. "You want to collect your reward."

"Yes, but my reward is not money, it is information. The Androche

knows why Merchant Baris wants me dead. It is a subject I am understandably curious about."

Songrel interlaced his fingers and stared down at them for a moment. When he looked up he said, "The reward is for your stasis-preserved testicles. Perhaps he is a collector like Aleen, but that is beside the point. I will play dead for you, but when you go to see Aleen I want you to carry a holocorder."

Snow nodded once. Songrel stood up and walked to a wall cupboard. He returned with the device, rested it on the table and turned it on.

"Now, your statement."

"He is dead," Aleen said, smiling.

"Yes," Snow confirmed, dropping Songrel's identity tag on the table, "yet I get the impression you knew before I came here."

Aleen went to the drinks cabinet, poured Snow a whisky and brought it over to him. "I have friends among the proctors. As soon as his wife called in the killing – she was hysterical apparently – they informed me."

"Why did you want him killed?"

"That is none of your concern. Drink your whisky and I will get you the promised information."

Aleen turned away from him and moved to a computer console elegantly concealed in a Louis XIV table. Snow had the whisky to his lips just as his suspicious nature cut in. Why was it necessary to get the information from the computer? She could just tell him. Why had she not poured a drink for herself? He set the drink down on a table, unsampled. Aleen looked up, a dead smile on her face, and as her hand came up over the console Snow dived to one side. On the wall behind him a picture blackened, then burst into oily flames. He came up on one knee and fired once. She slammed back out of her chair onto the floor, her face burning like the picture.

Snow searched hurriedly. Any time now the proctors would arrive. In the bathroom he found a device like a chrome penis with two holes in the end. One hole spurted out some kind of fluid and the other hole sucked. Some kind of contraceptive device? He traced tubes back from it to a unit that contained the bottle of fluid and some very complicated straining and filtering devices. To his confusion he realised it was for removing the contents of a woman's uterus, probably after sex. She collected men's semen? Shortly after, he found a single stasis bottle

containing that substance. It had to be his own. He suddenly he had an inkling of an idea – a possible explanation for his situation of the last five years. He took the bottle and poured its contents down the sink before turning to leave the apartment, but the delay had been enough.

Hirald looked at the man in the condensation bottle, her expression revealing nothing. He was alive beyond his time; some sadist had dropped a bottle of water in with him to prolong his suffering. He stared at Hirald with drying eyes, the empty bottle by his head, his body shrunken and badly sunburnt, his black tongue protruding. Hirald looked around carefully – there were harsh penalties for what she was about to do – then placed a small chrome cylinder against the glass near the man's head. There was a brief flash. The man convulsed and the bottle was misted with smoke and steam. Hirald replaced the device in her pocket, stood and walked on. Her masters would not have been pleased at her risking herself like this, but they did not have complete control over her actions.

The grey-bearded proctor was crouched behind the sofa, his short-barrelled riot gun resting on the back and sighted on the bathroom door. Songrel stood by the moisture lock, his own weapon also trained on Snow.

Songrel glanced across at the Androche's corpse. "You will be staying for the trial," he said, nodding to the proctor.

The man stood and moved across the room, not letting Snow out of his sights for a moment. Even as the barrel of the riot gun was pushed up under Snow's chin he noted how the man was careful not to block Songrel's field of fire. Snow allowed his weapon to be taken. Maybe he could have dealt with the proctor, but not Songrel as well. Now the proctor backed off, flicking one puzzled glance at the weapon he had taken before pocketing it.

Songrel opened the moisture lock and gestured Snow over. There, maybe, Snow thought. He walked over, stepped through the lock and glanced behind him. The proctor, staying well back, shook his head and grinned. Swearing under his breath, Snow shut his plastron mask and ducked out into the arid day.

They gave him no openings, not on the stairs nor out on the dusty street. Always, one of them would be covering him from a distance of

two or three paces. Snow was fast; faster than most people had reason to suspect, but not fast enough to outrun a bullet or energy charge.

"You know you're killing me," he said to Songrel.

"There'll be guards during the trial, and we'll give you an escort after… if you're released," Songrel replied.

Opening his dust robes so both of them could see clearly what he was doing, he reached to the back of his belt and removed the holocorder Songrel had given him.

"You've got all the evidence you need here, and I have to wonder how many of your guards might be temped by the merchant's reward."

Songrel appeared pained at this; he stepped closer to take the recording device, his weapon directed at Snow's mask.

The woman seemed to come out of nowhere: one moment all movement in the street was warily distant, then she was there, holding the proctor's riot gun as he stumbled and went face down. Songrel's aim slid aside to track her.

That was enough of an opening for Snow. He snapped his boot forward catching the man in the gut, then chopped down on the back of his neck as he bowed forward. Songrel's gun thudded into the dust. Snow dropped, snatched and rolled, coming up to get the woman in his sights. She wasn't there.

"I think this is yours," she said, to one side of him.

Turning his head only, he observed her. With one hand she was covering him with the riot gun. In her other hand she was holding his own weapon. She lowered the riot gun.

"Perhaps now would be a good time to leave?"

By the condensation jar Snow paused for breath. The woman, he noted, seemed not to need the rest, hardly seemed to be breathing at all. He shook his head and studied the jar. The man was now dead, his body giving up the last of its water for the public good. Snow paused for a moment longer to observe the greasy film on the inside of the jar before moving on. Someone had finished the poor bastard off.

"Why did you help me?" he asked the woman.

"Because you needed help."

Snow contained his annoyance. With a glance back towards the station he set out again, the woman easily keeping pace with him. She'd had her opportunity to kill him, so it was not the reward she was after.

Time enough to find out what her angle was when they had put some distance between themselves and potential pursuit.

Once out of sight of the station they left the road, setting out across a spill of desert to a distant rock field. There, Snow felt, they would be able to lose themselves, unless a sand shark got them first. He drew his pistol as he walked and kept his eyes open. One sand shark twitched its motion-detecting palps above the sand, but shortly subsided. It must have fed in the last year; it would be quiescent for another year to come.

Having reached the rocks and firmer ground without event Snow slowed his pace whilst studying his companion. She was incongruously attractive and clean-looking and he found himself staring in fascination, reluctant to tell her, after what she had done for him, that he normally travelled alone. That, he supposed was the problem – he travelled alone by necessity, not choice. He gave an open-handed gesture and she walked on a pace ahead of him. Whatever danger she represented to him, at least he had her in sight.

Now studying her from the side he said, "I won't be going much farther. I want to set up camp before the Thira."

The woman nodded, but made no comment.

Snow made a fire from old carapaces and removed his mask in the light of evening. He was curious to note that the woman had not replaced her mask, yet her skin was clear and unblemished. She sank down next to him by the fire, with a grace that could only reflect superb physical condition.

"You never answered my question," he said.

With her head bowed the woman said, "You owe me, perhaps for your life. For that will you allow me to tell you in my own time?"

"People have been trying to kill me. I'm not sure I can afford to be that generous."

She shrugged. "I could have killed you."

Snow bit down on frustration: he did owe her for his life. She could have killed him and, without her help, killers would have gathered at the water station whilst slow due process brought him to court. He took a deep breath and searched for some stillness.

"What do I call you?" he asked eventually.

"Hirald."

He struggled on, "Where did you come from… before?"

"Across the Thira."

Snow had his doubts about that reply. He had crossed the Thira a couple of times and knew it to be rough going. Hirald looked like someone fresh from a month's sojourn in a water station.

"I see," he said.

"You are Snow," she said, turning and fixing him with blue eyes that appeared violet in the fading red light.

He felt his stomach lurch at that look, and then he immediately felt self-contempt. After all these years he was still susceptible to physical attraction… to beauty… "Yes, I am."

"I would like to travel with you for a while."

"You know who I am, and I suspect you know why I am suspicious of your motives."

She smiled at him and he felt that lurch again. He turned and spat in the fire.

"I'm crossing the Thira," he said.

"I have no problem with that."

Snow lay back and rested his head on one of the packs. He pulled a thermal sheet across his body and stared up at the sky. The red-tinted swathe of stars was being encroached on by the asteroids of the night – all that remained of Vatch's moon after some long-ago cataclysm. A single sword of light from an ion drive cut the sunset.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I'm lonely, and I feel like a change."

Snow grunted and closed his eyes. She was not out to kill him, but her motives remained unrevealed. Whatever, she could never keep to the pace he set and would soon abandon him, and the unsettling things he was feeling would soon go away. He slept.

Sunlight on his face, bringing the familiar tingling prior to burning, had his hand up and closing his mask across before he was fully awake. He looked at Hirald across the dead ashes of the fire and got the unsettling notion that she had not changed position all night. He sat up, then after a muttered good morning, went behind a rock and urinated into his condenser pack. Following the ritual of every morning for many years now, he then emptied the moisture-collectors of his undersuit into it as well. The collector bottle he emptied into his drinking bottle before dipping his toothbrush and cleaning his teeth.

By the time he had finished his ablutions and come out from behind the rock, Hirald had opened a breakfast-soup ration pack and it was bubbling under its lid. Snow reached for another pack, but she held up her hand.

"This is for you. I have already eaten."

"Did you sleep at all?"

"A little. Tell me, how do you come to be in possession of proscribed weaponry?"

"Took it off someone who tried to kill me," he lied. He could hardly tell her he had brought it here before the runcible proscription and modified it himself over many years thereafter. He sat down to drink his breakfast.

When he had finished they set out across the Thira. Hirald noted him looking at her after an hour's walking and closed her mask. He thought no more of it – lots of people disliked the masks, and were prepared to pay the price of water-loss not to wear them so much.

By midmorning the temperature had reached forty-five degrees and was still rising. A sand shark broke from the surface of a dune and came scuttling after them for a few metres, then halted, panting like a dog, tired or too well fed to continue – that, or it had sampled human flesh before.

When the temperature reached fifty and the cooling units of Snow's undersuit were labouring under the load, he noted that Hirald still easily matched his pace. When a crab-bird dropped clacking out of the sky at them she brought it down with one shot before Snow could even think of reaching for his weapon, and before he saw what weapon she shot the creature with. She was a remarkable woman.

Shortly after midday Snow called a halt. "We'll rest until evening, then continue through the night and tomorrow morning. The following night should bring us out the other side."

Hirald nodded in agreement, seemingly unconcerned

They slept under the reflective shelter of Snow's day tent, then moved on at sunset after Snow had checked their position. They walked all night and most of the following morning, and when they finally set up the tent again Snow was exhausted. With a hint of irritation he told Hirald he wanted privacy in the tent and suggested she set up her own. Once inside his tent he sealed up and stripped naked. He then cleaned himself and the inside of his undersuit with a cycle sponge –

a device that made it possible to stay clean with a quarter litre of water and little spillage. After this he pulled on a pair of towelling shorts and lay back with his miniature air cooler humming away at full power. It was luxury of a kind. After half an hour's sleep he woke and opened the tent to look outside. Hirald was sitting in the sand with her mask open. She was watching the horizon intently, her stillness quite unnatural.

"Don't you have a day tent?" Snow asked.

She shook her head.

"Come and join me then," he said, reversing back into his tent. Hirald stood and walked over, apparently unaffected by the baking sun. She entered the tent and closed it behind her then, after a glance at Snow, she began to remove her survival suit. Snow turned away for a moment then thought, *what the hell*, and turned back to watch. She had not asked him to turn his head. Under her suit she wore a single, skin-hugging garment. The material was like white silk, and almost translucent. Snow swallowed dryly, then tried to distract himself by wondering about her sanitary arrangements. As she lifted her legs up to remove her trousers from her feet he saw then how the matter was arranged and wondered if a blush was evident on his white skin. The garment was slit from the lower part of her pale pubic hair round to top crease of her buttocks.

As she finally removed her trousers Hirald looked at him and noted the direction of his attention. He raised his gaze and met her eye to eye. She smiled at him and, still smiling, stretched the sleeves of the garment down and off over her hands and rolled it down below her breasts. Snow cleared his throat and tried to think of something witty to say. She was a succubus, a lonely desert man's fantasy. Still smiling she came across the tent on her hands and knees, put her hand against his chest and pushed him back, sat astride him, and with her pale hair falling either side of his head she leant down and kissed him on the mouth. Her mouth was sweet and warm. Snow was thoroughly aware of her hard little nipples sliding from side to side against his chest. He touched the skin of her shoulders and found it dry and warm. She sat back then and looked down at him for a moment. There was something strange about that look – a kind of cold curiosity. She slid forward onto his stomach, then turned and reached back to pull his shorts down and off his legs. He was amazed at just how far she could twist and bend her body. Once his shorts were removed she slid back until his

penis rested between her buttocks then, after raising herself a little, she continued to push back, bending it over until it hurt, then with a swift movement of her pelvis, took it inside her. Snow groaned, then gritted his teeth as she started to move, still staring down at him with that strange expression.

In the evening, when it was time to go, Snow felt a bone-deep lethargy. He had not slept much during the afternoon. Each time he had tried to relax after a session of sex, Hirald would do something he could not resist. Her last climax had been so intense that she had cried out and shuddered uncontrollably, and after it she had looked down at herself in surprise and shock. Thereafter she had been eager to repeat the experience. Snow felt sore and drained.

As they walked across the darkened violet sands they had talked little, but one conversation had raised Snow's suspicions.

"Your hand, how did you lose it?"

"Andronache challenge. It was shredded by a flack shell."

"How is it now?"

Snow had paused before replying. Did she know?

"What do you mean: how is it? It was amputated. It is no longer there."

"Yes," she had said, and no more.

The sun was crossing the horizon and the night asteroids fading out of the sky when they reached the rock-field at the edge of the Thira. With little energy for conversation, Snow set up his day tent and collapsed inside, instantly asleep. When he woke in the latter part of the day it was to discover himself undressed under a blanket, with Hirald lying beside him. She was up on her elbow, her head propped on her hand, studying his face. As soon as she saw that he was awake she handed him a carton of mixed juice. He sat up, the blanket sliding down. She was naked. He drank the juice.

"I'm glad you came along," he said, and the rest of the day was spent in pleasant activity.

That night they moved deep into the rock field. The following day passed much as the one before.

"I think it fair to tell you I have an implant," Snow said as he rested after some particularly vigorous activity. "You won't get pregnant by me, and my semen is little more than water and a few free proteins."

"Why do you feel it necessary to tell me this?" Hirald asked him.

"As you know, there is a reward out for my testicles, stasis preserved. This is not because Merchant Baris particularly wants me dead. I think it is because he is after my genetic tissue. At the water station the Androche… seduced me." Snow was uncomfortable with that. "She did it so she could collect my sperm, probably to sell."

"I know," Hirald said. Snow looked at her and she went on, "He is after your testicles or other body tissue to provide him with an endless supply of your genetic material."

Snow considered that. Of course there had to be more to Hirald than he had supposed, but the sex had clouded his thought-processes somewhat.

"It is the next best thing to having your entire living body. I suspect Baris thought it unlikely he could get away with that. He'd never get your entire body off-planet. This way he also corners the market."

"You know an awful lot about what Baris wants."

Hirald gazed at him very directly. "How is your hand?"

Snow looked down at the stump. He unclipped the covering and pulled it off. What he exposed was recognisably a hand, though deformed and almost useless. The covering had been cleverly made to conceal it, to make it appear as if the hand was missing.

"It will be no different from its predecessor in about six months. I intended to walk out of one water station without a hand, then into another station with a hand and a new identity."

"What about your albinism?"

"Skin dye and eye lenses."

"Of course. You cannot take transplants."

"No… I think you should explain yourself."

"The people I work for want the same as Baris: your genome."

"You've had opportunity…"

"No, they want the best option, which is you, willingly. I want you to gate back to Earth with me."

"Why?"

"You are regenerative. It is the source of your immortality. We know this now. You have known it for more than a thousand years."

"Still, why?"

"We have managed to keep your secret for the last three hundred years, ever since it was discovered. Ten years ago the knowledge was leaked. Now several organisations know about you, and what you represent: whoever can decode your genome has access to immortality,

and through that access to unprecedented wealth and power. That's why Baris was the first to track you down. There will be others."

"You work for Earth Central."

"Yes."

"Wouldn't it be better just to kill me and destroy my body?"

"Earth Central does not suppress knowledge." Hirald smiled at him. "You should be old enough to understand the futility of that. It wants the knowledge disseminated so that it doesn't put power into the hands of the wrong people. It could do immense good. The projections are that in ten years a treatment would become available to make anyone regenerative, within limits."

"Yet prior to this it kept a lid on things," Snow said.

"It guarded your privacy. It did not suppress knowledge. Not to seek out knowledge is not the same as suppressing it."

"Is Earth Central so moral now?" Snow wondered, then could have kicked himself for his stupidity. Of course Earth Central was. Only human beings and other low-grade sentients could become corrupt, and Earth Central was the most powerful AI in the human Polity. Hirald, noting his discomfiture, did not answer his question.

"Will you come?" she asked him.

Snow was gazing at the wall of the tent as if he could see through it across the rock field. "This requires thought, not instant decisions. Two days should bring us to my home. I'll consider it."

Draped in chameleon cloth the hover transport vanished into the surrounding dunes. Inside the transport Jharit shuffled a pack of cards and played a game men like himself had played in similar situations for many centuries. His wife, Jharilla, slept. Trock was cleaning an antique revolver he had picked up at an auction in the last water station. The bullets he had acquired with it were arrayed in neat, soldierly rows on the table before him.

Canard Meck was plugged in, trying to pick up information from the net and the high-speed communications the runcible AI exchanged with its subminds. The call came as a relief to all of them but her – she resented dropping out of that world of perfect logic and pure clarity of thought, back into the sweat-stink of the transport.

"I am Baris," said the smiling face from the screen.

Coming straight to the point Jharit said, "You have the information?"

"I have," Baris confirmed, his smile only slightly less, "and I will be coming to join you for the final chase."

Jharit and Trock exchanged a look.

"As you wish. You are paying."

"Yes, I am." The merchant's smile was gone now. "Turn on your beacon and I will join you within the hour."

"How are you getting out here?" Canard Meck asked.

"By AGC of course," Baris said, turning to look towards her.

"All AGCs are registered. The AI will know where you are."

Baris flicked his fingers at this, assuming an expression of contempt. "No matter. We will continue from your position to… our destination, in the transport."

"Very well," Canard Meck agreed.

Baris waited for something more to be said. When nothing was he blanked the screen with a disappointed moue.

The merchant arrived in a fancy repro Macrojet AGC. He climbed out wearing sand fatigues and followed by two women dressed much the same. One carried a hunting rifle and ammunition belts; the other carried various unidentifiable packages. Baris struck a pose before them. He was a handsome man, but none of the four reacted to this foolish display. They knew that anyone who had reached the merchant's position was no fool. Jharit and Jharilla looked at him glassy-eyed. Trock inspected the rifle. Canard Meck glanced at one of the women, took in the imbecilic smile, then returned her attention to the merchant.

"Shall we be on our way then?" she said.

Baris nodded and, still smiling, clicked his fingers and walked to the transport. The two women followed him, obedient as dogs. The four came after: hounds of a different breed.

Out of the rock field reared the first of the stone buttes, carved by wind-blown sand into something resembling a man-like statue sunk up to its chest in the ground. In the cracks and divisions of its head, mica and quartz glittered like insectile eyes. Snow led the way to the base of the butte where slabs of the same stone lay tilted in the ground.

"Here," he said, holding his hand out to a sandwich of slabs. With a grinding noise, the top slab pivoted to one side to expose a stair dropping a short distance to the floor of a tunnel. "Welcome to my home."

"You live in a hole in the ground?" Hirald asked, with a touch of irony.

"Of course not. Follow me."

As they climbed down the slab swung back across above them and wall lights clicked on. Hirald noted that the tunnel led under the butte and had already worked things out by the time they reached the chimney and the elevator car. They climbed inside the car and sprawled in plush seats as it hauled them up a chimney cut through the centre of the butte.

"This must have taken you some time," Hirald observed.

"The chimney was already here. I first found it about two hundred years ago. Others had lived here before me, but in rather primitive conditions. I've been improving the place ever since."

The car arrived at its destination and they walked from it into a complex of moisture-locked rooms at the head of the butte.

With a drink in her hand Hirald stood at a polarised panoramic window and gazed out across the rock field for a moment, then returned her attention to the room and its contents. In a glass-fronted case along one wall was a display of weapons dating from the 22nd century, and at the centre a sword from some prespace age. Hirald had to wonder where and when Snow had acquired it. She turned from the case as Snow returned to the room, dressed now in loose black trousers and a black, open-necked shirt. The contrast with his white skin and hair and pink eyes gave him the appearance of someone who might have a taste for blood.

"There's some clothing there for you to use if you like, and the shower. There's plenty of water here," he told her.

Hirald nodded, placed her drink on a glass-topped table, and headed back into the rooms Snow had come from. Snow watched her go. She would shower and change and be little fresher than she already was. He had noted with some puzzlement how she never seemed to smell bad, never seemed dirty.

"Whose clothing is this?" Hirald asked from the room beyond.

"My last wife's," said Snow.

Hirald came to the door with clothing folded over one arm. She looked at Snow questioningly.

"She killed herself about century ago," he said in a flat voice. "Walked out into the desert and burnt a hole through her head. I found her before the crab-birds and sand sharks."

"Why?"

"She grew old and I did not. She hated it."

Hirald didn't comment. She went to take her shower, and shortly returned wearing a skin-tight body-suit of translucent blue material, which she did not expect to be wearing for long once Snow saw her in it. He was occupied though – sitting in a swivel chair studying a screen. He was back in his dust robes, terrapin mask hanging open. She walked up behind him to see what he was looking at. She saw the hover transport on the sand and the two women pulling a sheet over it. She recognised Merchant Baris and the four hired killers.

"It would seem Baris has found me," Snow said, his tone cold and flat.

"You know him?"

"Met him once when he was younger. He hasn't changed much." He nodded at the screen. "The four with him look an interesting bunch."

"I met them: the Marsman and the Corporate woman are the leaders – mercenary group," said Hirald. "What defences does this place have?"

"None, I never felt the need for them."

"Are you sure they are coming here?"

"It seems strange that he has chosen this particular rock field on the whole planet. I'll have to go and settle this."

"I'll change," said Hirald, and hurried back to get her suit. When she returned Snow was gone, when she tried to follow she found the elevator car locked at the bottom of the shaft.

"Damn you," she said flatly, smashing her fist against a doorjamb, leaving a fist-shaped dent in the steel. Then she walked back a few paces, turned, ran and leapt into the shaft. The rails pinned to the edge were six metres away. She reached them easily, her hands locking on the polished metal with a thump. Laboriously she began to climb down.

Jharit smiled at his wife and nodded to Trock, who stood beyond her, strapping on body armour. This was the one. They would be rich after this. He examined the narrow-beam laser he held. He would have preferred something with a little more power, but it was essential that the body not be too badly damaged. He turned to Baris as the merchant sent his two women back to the transport.

"We'll go in spread out. He probably has scanning equipment in

the rock field and if there's an ambush we don't want him to get too many of us at once."

Baris smiled and thumbed bullets into his rifle, adjusted the scope. Jharit wondered about him, wondered how good he was. He gave the signal for them to spread out and enter the rock field.

They were coming to kill him. There were no rules, no challenges offered. Snow braced the butt of his pistol against the rock and sighted along it.

"Anything?" Jharit asked over the com.

"Pin cameras," Jharilla told him. "I burnt a couple out, but there have to be more. He knows we're here."

"Remember, narrow-beam, we burn too much and there's no money. A clean kill. A head shot would be nice," Jharit added.

There was a whooshing sound, a brief scream, static over the com. Jharit hit the ground and moved behind a rock.

"What the hell was that?"

"He's got a fucking proton weapon. Fucking body armour's useless!"

Jharit felt a sinking sensation in his gut. They had expected projectile weapons, perhaps a laser.

"Who..?"

There was a pause.

"Trock?"

"Jharilla's dead."

Jharit swallowed dryly and edged on into the rock field.

"Position?"

"Don't know?"

"Meck?"

"Nothing here."

"Baris?"

There was no reply from the Merchant.

Snow dropped down off the top of the boulder and pulled some of the small but deadly grenades from his belt. Lacking a hand, he used his teeth to twist their tops right round. The dark-skinned one was over to his left, the Marsman over to his right. The others were further over to the right somewhere. He threw the two spheroids right and left and moved back, then flicked through multiple views on his

wrist screen. A lot of the cameras were out, but he pulled up a view of the Marsman. Two detonations. As the Marsman hit the ground he realised he had thrown too far. He flicked through the views again and caught the other stumbling through dust and wreckage, rock splinters imbedded in his face. Ah, so.

Snow moved to his left, checking his screen every few seconds. He halted behind a tilted slab and after checking his screen once more, squatted down and waited. With little regard for his surroundings Trock stumbled out of the falling dust. Snow smiled grimly under his mask and sighted on him, but before he could fire, red agony cut his shoulder. The smell of burning flesh. Snow rolled to one side, came up onto his feet, ran. Rock to one side of him smoked, pinged as it heated. He dived for cover, crawled amongst broken rock. The firing ceased. Now I'm dead, he thought. His pistol lay in the dust back there somewhere.

"He dropped his weapon, Trock. He's over to your left. Take him down, I can't get a sighting on him at the moment."

Trock spat a broken tooth from his mouth and walked in the direction indicated, his antique revolver in his left hand and his laser in his right. This was it. The bastard was dead, or perhaps not. *I'll cut his arms and legs off, the beam should cauterise sufficiently.* But Trock did not get time to fire. The figure in dust robes came out of nowhere to drop-kick him in the chest. The body armour absorbed most of the blow, but Trock went over. Before he could rise the figure was above him, a split-fingered blow spearing down. After that Trock saw nothing. Sprawled back he lifted fingers to the bleeding mess behind his broken visor. Then the pain hit and he started screaming.

Snow coughed as quietly as he could, opened his mask and gasped in pain. The burn had started at his shoulder and ended in the middle of his chest, but luckily his dust robes had absorbed most of the heat. A second more and he would have been dead. The pain was crippling. He knew he would not have the energy to withstand another attack like that, nor would he be likely to take any of the others by surprise. His adversary had been stunned by the explosion, angered by injury. Snow edged back through the rock field, his mobility rapidly decreasing. When a shadow fell across him he looked up into the inevitable.

"Why didn't you take his weapon?" Jharit asked, nodding back towards Trock, who was no longer screaming. He was curled foetal by a rock, a field dressing across his eyes and his body pumped full of self-administered pain-killers.

"No time, no strength... could only get him through his visor," Snow managed.

Jharit nodded and spoke into his com.

"I have him. Home in on my signal."

Snow waited for death, but Jharit squatted in the dust, seemingly disinclined to kill him.

"Jharilla was a hell of a woman," said Jharit, removing a stasis bottle from his belt and pushing it into the sand next to him. "We were married in Viking City twenty years ago." Jharit pulled a wicked ceramal knife from his boot and held it up before his face. "This is for her you understand. After I've taken your testicles and dressed that wound I'll see to your other injury. I don't want you to die yet. I have so much to tell you about her, and there is so much I want you to experience. You know she—"

Jharit turned at a sound, rose to his feet and drew his laser again. He stepped away from Snow and gazed around. Snow looked beyond him but could see nothing.

"If you leave here now, Marsman, I will not kill you."

The voice was Hirald's.

Jharit fired into the rocks and backed towards Snow.

"I have a singun and I am in chameleonwear. I can kill you any time I wish. Drop your weapon."

Jharit paused for a moment of indecision, then whirled, pointing his laser at Snow. The expression on his face told all. Before he could press the trigger he collapsed into himself: a central point the size of a pinhead, a plume of sand standing where he stood, then all blasted away in a thunderclap and encore of miniature lightnings across the ground. Snow slowly shoved himself to his feet as he stared in awe at the spot Jharit had occupied. He had heard of such weapons but had not believed they existed. He looked across as Hirald flickered back into existence only a few metres away. She smiled at him, just before the first shot ripped the side of her face away.

Snow knew he yelled, he might have screamed. He watched in impotent horror as the second shot smacked into her back and knocked her to the ground. Then: Baris and the Corporate woman, walking

out of the rock field. Baris sighted again as he walked, hit Hirald with another shot that ripped half her side away as he and his companion moved past her.

Snow felt his legs give way. He went down on his knees. Baris came before him, a self-satisfied smirk on his face. Snow gazed up at him, trying to pull the energy together, to throw it all into one last attempt. He knew it was what Baris was waiting for, but it was all he could do. He glanced aside at the woman, saw she had halted some way back. She was staring back past Baris at Hirald, horror on her face. Snow did not want to look there – he did not want to know.

"O my God! It's her!"

Snow pulled himself to his feet, dizziness making him lurch. Baris glanced at the Corporate woman in confusion, then pointed the rifle at Snow's face. The merchant relished his moment for the half a second it lasted. The hand punched through his body from the back, knocked the rifle aside, lifted him and hurled him against a rock with such force he stuck for a moment, then fell leaving a man-shaped corona of blood. Hirald stood there, revealed. Where the syntheflesh had been blown away, glittering ceramal was exposed, her white enamel teeth, one blue eye complete in its socket, the ribbed column of her spine. She observed Snow for a moment then turned towards the woman. Snow fainted before the scream.

He was in his bed and memories slowly dragged themselves into his mind. He lay there, his throat dry, and after a moment felt across to his numbed chest and the dressing. It was a moment before he dared open his eyes. Hirald sat at the side of the bed and when she saw he was awake she helped him up into a sitting position against his pillows. Snow observed her face. She had repaired the damage somehow, but the scars of that repair-work were still there. She looked just like a human woman who had been disfigured in an accident. She wore a loose shirt and trousers to hide the other repairs. As he studied her she reached up and self-consciously touched her face, before reaching for a glass of water to hand to him. That touch of vanity confused him for a moment. Gratefully, he drained the glass.

"You're a Golem android," he said in the end, unsure.

Hirald smiled, and it did not look so bad.

She said, "Canard Meck thought that." When she saw his confusion she explained, "The Corporate woman. She called me product, which

is an understandable mistake. I am nearly indistinguishable from the Golem Twenty-Two."

"What are you then?" Snow asked as she poured him another glass of water.

"A cyborg discovering she's more human than she thought. No one owns me."

Snow sipped his drink as he considered that. He was not sure what he was feeling.

"Will you come to Earth with me?" she asked.

Snow turned and watched her for a long time. He remembered how it had been in the tent as she, he realised, discovered that she was still human.

"You know, I will never grow old and die," she said.

"I see."

She tilted her head questioningly and awaited his answer.

A slow smile spread across his face. "I'll come with you," he told her. He put his drink down and reached out to take hold of her hand. There was still blood under her fingernails and the tear duct in her left eye was not working properly. It didn't matter. ●

About the Cover

This month's cover is Space Hotel, from Hardyware: The Art of David A. Hardy (Paper Tiger; 2001; 128 pp.; £20; ISBN1-85585-917-3). The cylindrical modules attached to the main part of the space station contain zero- and low-gravity facilities for tourists. These include a swimming pool (!), and a sports stadium, where zero-gee flight is possible. Quite different from what the first space tourists can expect nowadays...

This work was produced in 1989 for an exposition in Australia, and is currently in the private collection of Thomas Cook.

The artist's website is at http://www.astroart.org.

Charles Stross has recently sold five linked stories to Asimov's SF (Lobsters, June 2001 – which will appear in Gardner Dozois' Best New SF 15 next year; Troubador, October/November 2001; Tourist, March 2002, Halo, June 2002 and Router, forthcoming).
As well as this, a novel, Festival of Fools (Big Engine), and a collection of his short fiction, Toast (and other Burned-Out Futures) (Cosmos Books), will appear shortly. He has recently completed a long novel.
Herewith, the second instalment of his exciting new three-part serial...

The Atrocity Archive
Charles Stross

5. Ogre Reality

I wake up to discover my back feels as if the All Blacks have been performing a victory dance on it, my ankle's been turned on a lathe, and my left hand worked over with a steak tenderiser. I open my eyes; I'm lying on the floor, legs stretched out, and Mo is leaning over me. "Are you alright?" she asks, hoarse-voiced.

"Death shouldn't hurt like this," I croak. I blink painfully and wonder what the hell happened to her shirt – it looks as if it's been used as a nest by a family of hungry ferrets. "It had you for longer—"

"Once you began hacking at it," she begins, then pauses to clear her throat. "It let go. *Oof.* Think you can stand up? You turned that gadget on and the thing just *vanished.* Whipped back under the door and sort of faded out. Turned translucent and – went away."

I look round. I'm lying in a sticky black puddle of something that isn't blood, thankfully – or at least, not human blood. The light is normal for a dingy vestibule with an energy-saver bulb, and the tentacles have gone from the walls. "My phone," I say, pushing my back up against the wall. "I threw it out—"

Mo heaves herself upright and staggers to the front door, bends down and picks something up delicately. "You mean this?"

She drops it beside me, in about three separate pieces.

"Fuck. That was meant to call the Plumbers."

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"Come upstairs, you'd better explain." She pauses. "If you think it's safe?"

I try to laugh but a vicious stabbing pain in my ribs stops me: "I don't think that thing will be coming back any time soon. I fuzzed its eigenvector but good."

She unlocks the inner door and we stumble up three flights of stairs, then she opens another door and I somehow end up slumped across an overstuffed sofa from the Planet of the Landlords, gasping with pain. She double-locks and deadbolts the door then flops into an armchair opposite me. "What the hell was that?" she asks, rubbing her throat.

"That was what we call in the trade an Unscheduled Reality Excursion, usually abbreviated to 'Oh fuck'."

"Yes, but—"

"What I said earlier? We live in an Everett-Wheeler cosmology, all possible parallel universes coexisting. That thing was an agent someone summoned from elsewhere to, um—"

"Fuck with our metabolic viability," she suggests.

"Yeah, that." I pause and take stock of my ribs, ankle, and general frame of mind. My hands are shaking slightly and I feel clammy and cold with the aftershock, but not entirely out of control. Good. "You mentioned something about a coffee." I lever myself upright, "If you tell me where it is…"

"Kitchen's over there." I realise there's a breakfast bar and a cramped cooking niche behind me. I shamble over, fumble for the light switches, check there's water in the kettle, and begin scooping instant out of the first available jar. "My neck hurts. Do you have lots of, uh, reality excursions in this line of work?"

"That's the first I've ever had follow me home," I say truthfully: Fred the accountant doesn't count.

"Well I am glad to hear that." Mo stands up and goes somewhere else – bathroom, at a guess; I need the caffeine so badly that I don't really notice. While the kettle boils I root out a couple of mugs and some milk, and when I turn round she's back in the armchair wearing a clean T-shirt. I fill the mugs. "Milk, no sugar. Bathroom's behind you on the left," she adds, noncommittal.

One splash of water on my face later I'm back on the sofa with a mug of coffee, beginning to feel a bit more human – Neanderthal, maybe.

"What was that thing doing here?" she asks me.

"I don't know, and I'm not sure I want to know."

"Really?" She glares at me. "Trouble has a bad habit of following you around. First time I meet you, an hour later some Middle Eastern thugs stick me in the trunk of their car, drive me halfway round Santa Cruz, lock me in a cupboard, and gear up to sacrifice me. Second time I meet you, an hour later some random bad dream with too many tentacles ambushes me in my front hall." She pauses for a thoughtful moment. "Now granted, you seem to turn up in time to stop them, but, on the balance of prior probabilities there appears to be a statistical correlation between you appearing in my life and horrible things happening. What's *your* excuse?"

I shrug painfully. "What can I say? There seems to be a positive correlation in my life between people telling me to talk to you and horrible things happening to me. I mean, it's not as if I make a habit of letting random nightmares with too many tentacles come along on a date, is it? Parenthetically speaking," I add hastily.

"Huh. Well then. Got any ideas as to why this is happening, mister spy guy?"

"I am *not* a spy," I say, nettled, "and the answer—" is right in front of my pointy nose if I'd bloody well focus on it, I suddenly realise.

"Yes?" she prompts, noticing my pause.

"Those guys who officially didn't abduct you." I take a sip of coffee and wince; I'm not used to the instant stuff she uses. "And who weren't officially talking about sacrificing you. I want you to tell me everything you didn't officially tell anyone who debriefed you. Like, the whole truth."

"What makes you think I didn't tell—" she stops.

"Because you were afraid nobody would believe you. Because you were afraid they'd think you were a nut. Because there were no witnesses and nobody wanted to believe anything had happened to you in the first place because they'd have had to fill in too many forms in triplicate and that would be bad. Because you didn't owe the bastards anything for fucking up your life, if you'll excuse my French." I wave a hand in the general direction of the doorway. "*I* believe you. I know something really stinks around here. If I can figure out what it is, stopping it features high on my list of priorities. Is that enough for you?"

Mo grimaces, a strikingly ugly expression. "What's to say?"

"Lots. Your call: if you won't tell me what happened, I can't try and sort things out for you."

She sips her coffee as it cools. "After we met, I went home thinking everything was going to be okay. You, or the Foreign Office, or whoever, would sort things out so I could come home. It was all just a mix-up, right? I'd get my visa sorted out and be allowed to go back home without any more problems."

Another mouthful of coffee. "I walked back to my condo. That's one of the things I liked about UCSC; the town's small enough you can walk anywhere. You don't have to drive as long as you don't mind getting to SF being a royal pain. I was turning over a problem I'm working on, a way to integrate my probability formalism with Dempster-Shaffer logic. Anyhow, I stopped off at a convenience store to buy some stuff I was running out of and who should I run into but David? At least, I *thought* it was David." She frowns. "I thought he was out east, and I really didn't want to see him anyway – I mean, I'm over him. He's history."

"What makes you think it wasn't your ex-husband?" I ask.

"I— uh. Nothing, at the time. He just turned round from the counter and smiled at me and said, 'Can I give you a lift home?' and I sort of…" she trails off.

"It offered you a lift home," I echo.

"What do you mean, *it*?"

I close my eyes. "You got yourself into some really smelly shit there. Say some son of a bitch wants to abduct somebody. They have to get a victim profile, samples from the victim – it's not simple, not just messing around with hair or fingernail clippings for the DNA – but suppose they get it. Then they invoke, um, generate a vector field oriented on the victim's—"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll take that bit on trust."

"Okay, then. I'll give you some references tomorrow. Basically it's what used to be called an incubus: a demon lover. Something the victim won't resist because they don't *want* to resist. It's not actually a demon; it's just a hallucination, like a website generated by customer relationship management software from hell."

"A lure?"

"Yes, that's it exactly. A lure." I drain my coffee and put the mug down between my feet.

She shudders, looks worried. "Maybe I wasn't over him as thoroughly as I wanted to be."

"I know the feeling," I say, thinking of Mhari.

She shakes herself. "Anyway. Next thing I know I'm sitting in the back of a Lincoln and some guy I don't know who's wearing a Nehru suit and a beard is sticking a pistol in my side. And he says something like, 'American bitch, you have been selected for a great honour.' And I say, 'I'm not American', and he just sneers."

Her hand is shaking so badly that coffee slops on the floor.

"He just—"

"It doesn't matter, what happens next?" I ask, trying to get her over the emotional hump. Over there they hold grudges for a long time. Some of the Pathans are probably still plotting their revenge for Lord Elphinstone's expedition.

"We drive around for a bit and head out of town, northbound on highway one, then the car pulls up in this house and the driver opens the door and they push me in through a side-door into the house. The driver's wearing that long, baggy shirt and trousers you see on TV, and a scarf around his head, and he's got a beard, too. They push me through a kitchen and into a closet with a light then shut the door, and I hear them chain the door handles together. Someone else comes in and they talk for a bit, then I hear a door slam. That's when I pulled out my mobile phone and called you."

"You overheard them talking. What about?"

"I – wasn't concentrating much. Tell the truth" – she puts the cup down on the floor; its saucer is swimming in coffee – "I was afraid they were going to rape me. *Really* afraid; I mean, this was kidnapping, what would you expect? When they didn't, when they were talking, it was almost worse. Does that make any kind of sense? The waiting. But he – the one I didn't see – he had a deep voice, some accent – sounded German to me. Thick, gravelly, lots of sibilants. Had to keep repeating himself to the others, the Middle Eastern men. *The Opener of the Ways requires the wisdom*, he kept saying. *It needs information.* I think one of the Middle Eastern guys was objecting because after a bit there was a noise like—" she pauses, and swallows. "Like downstairs. And I didn't hear him again."

I shake my head. "This isn't making any sense so far—" Hastily: "No, I'm not saying you're wrong, I just can't figure out how it fits together. That's *my* problem, not yours."

I drain my coffee and wince as it hits my stomach and sits there, burning like a lump of molten lead. "Sounds like they were talking about a blood sacrifice. That's the Sacrifice of Knowledge rite. Middle

Eastern guys. An incubus. German accent. You're sure it was German?"

"Yes," she says gloomily. "At least, I think it was German; Middle-European for sure."

"That really *is* odd." Which distracts me and catapults my train of thought right into terra incognita because there are *no* usual suspects in the occult field in Germany; the Abwehr's Rosenberg Gruppe and any survivors of the Thule Gesellschaft were 'shot trying to escape' by late June 1945. The camp guards were mostly executed or pulled long prison sentences, the high-ups responsible for the Ahnenerbe-SS were executed, the whole country turned into a DMZ as far as the occult is concerned. After the Third Reich's answer to the Manhattan Project came so close to completion, that was about the one thing that Truman and Stalin and Churchill all saw eye-to-eye on – and the current government shows no desire to go back down that route of blood and madness.

"He went on a bit," Mo adds unexpectedly.

"Really? What about?"

"He wanted to go home, to take help home, something like that. I think."

I sit up, wince as my ribs remind me not to move too fast. "Help. Did he say what kind?"

Mo frowns again. Her thick, dark eyebrows almost join in the middle, looming like thunderclouds. "He went on about the Opener of the Ways a bit more. Oddly, as if he was talking about me. Said that help for the struggle against the Dar-al-Harb would wait until the ceremony of, uh, 'Unbinding the roots of Ig-drazl'? Then he would 'Open the bridge and bring the ice giants through'. He was very emphatic about the bridge, the bridge to living space. That was his term for it: *living space*. Does that make any sense?"

"It makes an *oh-shit* kind of sense." I watch as she picks up her mug and rolls it round between her hands. "Was that all?"

"All – yes. I waited until I heard them go out, then I phoned you. I obviously got things wrong, though, because the next thing I knew they yanked open the door and the one with the gun grabbed the phone and stamped on it. He was *angry*, but the other – with the accent—" she judders to a stop.

"Can you describe him?"

She swallows. "That's the crazy thing. When they opened the door I kind of expected Arnie Schwartzenegger in *Terminator*, except he

wasn't. There were just these four Middle Eastern guys, and one of them had – I can't, uh, can't remember his face. Just those eyes. They seemed to glow, sort of greenish. Like marbles. Like there was something luminous and wormy behind his face. He, the one with the eyes and this weird German accent, he was *angry* and yelled at me and I was so afraid, but they just smashed my phone then shut the door on me again. Chained the door shut and overturned a table or something against it. And I – hell." She finishes her coffee. "That was about the worst hour of my life." Pause. "It could have been worse." Pause. "They could have." Pause. "You might not have answered." Pause. "They might not have found me."

"All in a day's work," I say with forced light-heartedness, which has nothing to do with the way I feel. "When the cops brought you out, did you see anything?"

"I wasn't paying much attention," she says shakily. "There were gunshots, though. Then what looked like a whole SWAT team kicked the cupboard door in and pointed their toys at me. You ever had two guys point assault rifles at your head, so close you can see the grooves on the inside of the barrels? You just lie there very still and try very hard not to look threatening." Pause. "Anyway, one of the agents in charge figured out I was the hostage in about three seconds flat and they led me out through the front. There was blood everywhere and two bodies, but not the guy with the weird eyes. I'd recognize him. Thing is, there were strange symbols all over the wall; it was white-washed and it looked like they'd been painting on it in thick black paint, or blood, or something. A low table under it, with a trashed laptop and some other stuff. Candlesticks, an arc-welding power supply. It was weird, I guess you'd know how weird it looked. Then they drove me away."

My bad feeling is getting worse. In fact, it's not setting off alarm bells in my head any more: it's sounding the Three Minute Warning. "Mind if I use your phone?" I ask, carefully nonchalant: "I think we still need the Plumbers."

Due to the miracles of matrix management Bridget is my head of department and writes my personal efficiency assessments, and Harriet is her left hand of darkness and handles administrative issues like training: but Andy is my line manager with overall responsibility for my effectiveness and work assignment, and Angleton is just the guy

I'm acting as temporary private secretary for. I decide to start at the bottom of the seniority queue, consign Harriet to the pits of operational ineffectiveness – I mean, this is a woman who would give you a written reprimand for wasting departmental funds if you used silver bullets on a werewolf – and conclude that my best chance of survival is to throw myself on Andy's mercy.

Which means I nobble him absolutely as soon as I can, first thing in the morning.

"Mind if I have a word?" I ask, sticking my head around his door without asking – the red light is off.

Andy is slumped behind his desk, nursing his starter-motor coffee mug. He raises an eyebrow at me. "You look—" He stabs a finger at his keyboard, raises another eyebrow at his email. "Oh. So it was *you* who called the Plumbers out last night."

I sit down in the chair opposite his desk without asking permission. "Angleton told me to pump Mo after work—" I see his expression "—for information, dammit!"

Andy hides behind his coffee. "Do go on," he says warmly, "this is the best entertainment I'm going to get all morning."

"Then you must be hard up. We ate out, then went back to her place for some more sensitive discussions about the, uh, non-events last month. Something was waiting for us in the lobby."

"Something." He looks sceptical. "And you called out the Plumbers for that?"

I yawn: it's been a long night. "It tried to rip her fucking head off and I've got a cracked rib to show for it. If you'd read that goddamn report you'd see what forensics found in the carpet: they're never going to get the ichor stains out—"

"I'll read it." He puts his coffee mug down. "First, give me the basics. How did you deal with it?"

I produce the wreckage of my Laundry-issue palmtop. "I'll be needing a new PDA, this one's fucked. Mind you, it's not as fucked as the malevolent mollusc from Mars that jumped us: I bumped the fuzz diffuser up to full power and piped the entire entropy pool into it over wide-spectrum infrared. It decided it didn't like that and discorporated instead of sticking around to finish the job, otherwise you'd be spending this morning watching them hoover me off the walls and ceiling."

I take as deep a breath as the strapping around my ribs will permit. "Anyway, afterwards I got the whole story out of Mo. The bits she was

afraid of telling anyone for fear they wouldn't believe her. And that's why I called the Plumbers. See, the Yank field group who rescued her didn't tell us what the hell was going on. The leader was some Arab guy with a German accent, talking about help for the struggle with the Dar-al-Harb once the roots of Yggdrasil are unbound. Only they didn't get him – or she didn't see his body. Boss, do we have anything on German terror groups using Beckenstein-Skinner actor theory to possess their victims? Hell, anything about any German terror groups more recent than the Ahnenerbe using occult techniques?"

Andy looks at me with a stony expression. "Wait here. Do *not* move." He pushes the DNI button (turning on the red warning light outside the door – WARNING: CLASSIFIED ACTIVITIES: DO NOT INTRUDE) then stands up and hurries out.

I sit there and let my eyes roam around Andy's cubbyhole. The contents are prosaic: one desk, institutional (scratched), one swivel chair (used), two armless visitor chairs (ditto), one bookcase, and a classified document safe (basically a steel cabinet with lockable metal doors on it). His PC is five years old and running a password-locked screensaver, and his desk is clear – no papers lying around. In fact, if it wasn't for the classified document safe and the lack of papers it could be a low-level manager's office in any cash-pinched business in corporate Britain.

I'm leaning back in my chair and inspecting the flecks of institutional paint smeared on the frosted glass in the high window when the door opens again. Andy enters, closely followed by Derek and – shock, horrors – Angleton. I'm surrounded! "Here he is," says Andy.

Angleton claims Andy's chair behind the desk – the privilege of the senior inquisitor – and Andy sits down next to me, while Derek stands at parade rest in front of the door, as if to stop me escaping. He's got some kind of box like a small briefcase, which he parks on the floor next to his feet.

"Speak," says Angleton.

"I did as you told me. Mo and I were talking. I kept it to non-classified while we were in public; I convinced her I needed to hear the full story, not just the official version, so we went back to her place. We were jumped in the hallway. Afterwards, she told me enough that I thought there was a clear and present danger to her life. Did Andy tell you—"

Angleton snaps his fingers at Derek. Derek, who is not my idea of

an obedient flunky, nevertheless obediently passes him the briefcase, which he opens on the desk. It turns out to contain a small mechanical typewriter with a couple of sheets of paper already wound around the roller. He laboriously taps out a sentence, then turns the typewriter towards me: it says *SECRET OGRE CARNATE GECKO*, and I get an abrupt sinking feeling in my stomach.

"Before you leave this office you will write down everything you remember about last night," he says tersely. "You will not leave this office until you have finished and signed off on the report. One of us will stay with you until the job is done, and countersign that this is a true transcript and that there were no uncleared witnesses. Once you leave this office you will not see this document again. You will not, repeat *not*, discuss last night's events with anyone other than the participants and the people in this room without first obtaining written permission from one of us. Do you understand?"

"Uh, yeah. You're classifying everything under *OGRE CARNATE GECKO* and I'm not to discuss it with anyone who isn't cleared. Can I ask why the typewriter? I could email—"

Angleton looks at me witheringly: "Van Eck Radiation." He snaps his fingers. *But we're in the Laundry*, I protest silently: *the whole building is Tempest-shielded.* "Start typing, Bob."

I start typing. "Where's the delete key on this – oh."

"You're typing on carbon paper. In triplicate. Once you finish, we burn the carbons. And the typewriter ribbon."

"You could have offered a quill pen: that'd be more secure, wouldn't it?" I peck away at the keyboard in a purposeful manner. After a minute or two Angleton silently rises and ghosts out of the room. I peck on, occasionally swearing as I catch a fingernail under a key or jam a bunch of letters together. Finally I'm done: one page of single-spaced, densely printed text, detailing the events of last night. I sign each copy and present them to Andy, who countersigns, then carefully inserts them into a striped-cover folder and passes it to Derek, who writes out receipts for them and hands a copy to each of us. He leaves without a word.

Andy walks round the desk, stretches, then looks at me. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Huh? What's wrong?"

Andy looks morose. "If I'd known you'd show such a well-developed talent for raking up the mud…"

"Comes of my hacking hobby before I came to the attention of… look. I called the Plumbers because I had reason to be afraid that Mo – Professor O'Brien – was in serious danger. Would you rather I hadn't?"

"No." He sighs. For a moment he looks old. "You did the right thing. It's just that the Plumbing budget is chargeable to departmental accounts. That leaves us open to some rather nasty manoeuvring if the usual suspects decide it's an opportunity to extend their little empires. I'm wondering how the hell we're going to spin it past Harriet."

"Why don't you just tell – oh."

"Yes." He nods at me. "You're beginning to catch on. Now run along and get back to work. I'm sure your in-tray is overflowing."

I'm working my way through that overcrowded in-tray late in the afternoon when Harriet stalks in without knocking. (Actually, I'm up to my eyeballs in a clipping from the Santa Cruz County Sentinel: It makes for fascinating reading: *TWO DEAD IN MURDER, SUICIDE.* Two unidentified males, one believed to be a Saudi Arabian national, found dead in a house up towards Davenport. Police investigating weird occult symbols smeared on the walls in blood. Drugs suspected.) "Ah, Bob," she coos with malevolent solicitude. "Just the person I was looking for!"

Oh shit. "What can I do for you?" I ask.

She leans over my desk. "I understand you called out the Plumbers last night," she says. "I happen to know that you're currently assigned to Angleton as JPS, which is a non-operational role and therefore doesn't give you release authority for wet-and-dry issues. You are no doubt aware that cleanup funds are allocated on a per-department basis, and require prior authorisation from your head of department, in writing. You didn't obtain authorisation from Bridget, and funnily enough, you didn't approach me for a release, either." She smiles with chilly insouciance. "Would you like to explain yourself?"

"I can't," I say.

"I – *see*." Harriet looms over me, visibly working on her anger. "You realise that last night you cost our working budget more than seven *thousand* pounds? That's going to have to be justified, Mr Howard, and *you* are going to justify it to the Audit Commission when they come round next month. Let's see—" she flips through what looks for all the world like a commercial invoice "—cleaning up Professor

O'Brien's front door, sweeping her apartment for listeners and actors, *rehousing* Professor O'Brien in a secure apartment, armed escort, medical expenses. What on earth have you been up to?"

"I can't tell you," I say.

"You're going to tell me. That's an order, by the way," she says in conversational tones. "You're going to tell me in writing *exactly* what happened there last night, and explain why I shouldn't take the expenses out of your pay packet—"

"Harriet."

We both look round. Angleton's door is ajar; I wonder how long he's been standing there.

"You don't have clearance," he says. "Let it drop. That's an order."

The door shuts. Harriet stands there for a moment, her jaw working soundlessly as if she's forgotten how to speak. I commit the spectacle to memory for future enjoyment. "Don't think this is the last you'll hear of this," she snaps at me as she leaves, slamming the door.

TWO DEAD IN MURDER, SUICIDE. Hmm. Ahnenerbe. Thule Gesellschaft. Incubi. German accents. Opener of the Ways. Double-hmm. I pull my terminal closer; it's only got access to low-classification and public sources, but it's time to do some serious data-mining. I wonder… just what have Yusuf Qaradawi's friends and the Mukhabarat got to do with the last and most secret nightmares of the Third Reich?

The next day I go into the office and find Nick waiting for me at my desk like an overexcited trainee schoolmaster. This is an unscheduled intrusion in my plans, which mostly revolve around applying some security patches to the departmental file server and digging out the maintenance schematics to Angleton's antique Memex.

"Come along now! I've got something to show you," he says, in a tone that makes it clear I don't have any choice. He leads me up a staircase carpeted in a thick bottle-green pile that I haven't seen before, then along a corridor with dark, oak-panelled walls like a provincial gentlemen's club from the 1930s, except that gentlemen's clubs don't come with closed circuit TV cameras and combination locks on the doors.

"What *is* this place?" I ask.

"Used to be the director's manor," he explains. "When we had a director." When we had a director: I don't ask. He stops at a thick oak door and punches some digits into the lock, then opens it: "After you," he says.

There's a conference table and a modern – by Laundry standards – laptop set up at one end of it. A whole shitload of electronics racked up on shelves behind, along with some thick leather-bound books and a bunch of stuff like silver pencils, jars of mouldy dust, and what looks for all the world like a polygraph. As I go in I notice that the doorframe is unusually thick and there are no outside windows. "Is this shielded?" I ask.

Nick nods jerkily. "Well spotted, that man! Now sit down," he suggests.

I sit. The top shelf of the equipment rack is dominated by a glass bell jar with a human skull in it: I grin back at it. "'Alas, poor Yorick'."

"Carry on like you have been and maybe your head will fetch up in there one day," Nick says, grinning. "Ah." The door opened. "Andy."

"Why am I here?" I ask. "All this cloak and dagger shit is—"

Andy drops a fat lever-arch file on the table in front of me. "Read and enjoy," he says dryly. "One day you, too, can have the fun of maintaining this manual."

I open the cover to be confronted by a sheet which basically says I can be arrested for so much as thinking about disclosing the contents of the next page. I flip to page two and read a paragraph that essentially says 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here', so I turn *that* one over and get to the title page: *FIELD OPERATIONS MANUAL FOR COUNTER-OCCULT OPERATIONS*. Below it, in small print, it says *Approved by Departmental Quality Assurance Team* and then *Complies with BS5750 standard for total quality management*. I shudder: "Since when have we been into mummification?" I ask.

"Embalming—" Andy frowns for a moment. "Oh, you mean total quality—" he stops and cleared his throat. "One of these days your sense of humour is going to get you into trouble, Bob."

"Thanks for the advance warning." I look at the manual gloomily. "Let me guess. I'm to do as we discussed earlier – by the book. *This* book, right? Why wasn't I issued it before Santa Cruz?"

Andy pulls out the chair beside me and flops down in it. "Because that wasn't officially an operation," he says in tones of sweet reason. "That was an informal information-gathering exercise involving a non-classified source. Operations require sign-off at Director level. Informal information-gathering exercises don't."

"Uh." I put the folder down on the table. "Does Bridget have anything to do with this?"

"Tangentially."

Nick sniffs, loudly, from his post by the door. "Arse-covering, boy. *That* was meant to be a risk-free chat. *This* is about what you do when you're ordered to stick your head in the lion's mouth. Or up its arse to inspect the haemorrhoids."

I look round at him. "You're planning on sending me on an op?" I ask. "Happy joy. Not."

Andy glances at Nick. "He's beginning to get it," he comments.

"Are you planning on involving Professor O'Brien in this?" I ask. "I mean, it seems to me that she's the one under threat. Isn't she?"

"Well." Andy glances at Nick, then back at me. "You're on active service, so you need to know this stuff inside-out and upside down. But you're right, the specific reason for this session is what happened the other night. I can't confirm or deny the identities of anyone else involved, though."

"Then I've got a problem," I tell him. "I don't know if I should bring it up right now, but if I sit on it and I'm wrong… well, way I see it is, Mo is the one who's under threat and in need of protection. Right? I mean, *I* can cope with being drooled over by things with more tentacles than brains, but it's not exactly part of her job description, is it? You're supposed to be responsible for her safety. If you've got me going over rules of engagement, and she's involved, then when the shooting starts—"

Andy is nodding. It's a bad sign when your boss starts nodding at you before you finish each sentence.

"As a matter of fact I agree with your concerns completely," he says. "And yes, I agree we've got a problem. But it's not quite what you think it is." He leans forward and makes a steeple out of his fingers, elbows together on the table. The steeple leans sideways at an architecturally unsound angle: "We can probably keep her safe indefinitely, as long as she's locked down under a protection program and resident in one of our secure accommodation units. That's not in question; if nobody can see or track her, they can't attack her – although I'm not sure about the inability to track given that they must have obtained samples in order to spring that incubus on her last month. What concerns me is that such a posture is essentially defensive. We don't know for sure just what we're defending *against*, Bob, and that's bad."

Andy takes a deep breath, but Nick jumps in before he can continue: "We've dealt with Iraqi spies before, boy. This doesn't smell like them."

"Uh." I pause, unsure what to say. "What do you mean?"

"He means that the Mukhabarat simply don't have the technology to summon an incubus. Nor do they generally manage incarnations that leave Precambrian slime all over the carpet: about all they're up to is interrogation and compulsion of Watchers and a little bit of judicious torture. No real control of phase-space geometry, no Enochian deep grammar parse tree generators – at least none that we've seen the source code to. So we can't make any assumptions about the attacks on Mo. Someone tried to grab her for whatever purpose. By now, they must know we're onto them. The next logical step is for them to pull back and switch track to whatever they were working on in the first place – which is extremely dangerous for us because if they were trying to snatch her, they were probably working on weapons of mass destruction. We badly need to get them out in the open and our only bait is Professor O'Brien. But if she knows she's bait, she'll keep looking round for sharks – which will tip them off. So we're assigning you to shadow her, Bob. You keep an eye on her. We'll keep an eye on you. When they bite, we'll reel them in. You don't need to know how, or when, but you'll do well to read this manual so you know how we set up this kind of situation. Clear?"

I crane my neck round at Nick, whose expression is uncharacteristically flat: he stares right through me with eyes like gunsights. "I don't like it. I *really* don't like it."

"You don't have to," Andy says flatly. "We're *telling* you what to do. Your job is – I shouldn't be telling you this, it should be Angleton, this afternoon, but what the hell – you're going to be assigned to shadow Mo. We'll do the rest. All I want to hear from you now is that you're going to do as you're told."

I tense. "Is that an order?"

"It is now," says Nick.

When I get home after receiving my mission orders and preemptive chewing-out from Angleton I find my key doesn't turn in the lock. It's dark and it's raining so I lean on the doorbell continuously until the door swings open. Pinky stands behind it, one hand on the latch. "What took you so long?" I ask him.

He steps back. "These are yours, I believe," he says, handing me a bunch of shiny new keys. He clanks as he walks; he's wearing black combat boots, matching trousers, what looks like a leather vest, and

enough chains to stock a medium-sized prison. "I'm off clubbing tonight."

"Why the new keys?" I close the door and shake my hair, shrug off my coat and try to find room to hang it in the hall.

"They changed the locks today," he says conversationally: "departmental orders, apparently." There's a new mat inside the front door, and when I look closely I see silvery lettering in a very small font stitched into its edges. "They came and swept the house for listeners and actors then renewed the wards on all the windows, the doors, the air vents – even the chimney. Any idea why?"

"Yeah," I grunt. I head for the kitchen, squeezing past someone's battered suitcases that are parked in the hall.

"We've got a new flatmate, too," he adds. "Oh, Mhari's fucked off again, but this time she says she's moving into House Orange for good."

"Ah-hum." *Twist the knife in the wound, why don't you?* I inspect the kettle, then poke around inside my cupboard to see if there's any food more substantial than a pot noodle.

"You'll probably like the new flatmate, though," Pinky continues. "She's helping Brains with his omelettes in the front cellar – he's using high-intensity ultrasound, this time."

I find a pot noodle and a desiccated supermarket pizza base. There's cheese and tomato paste in the fridge, and a pork sausage I can chop up to go on top of it, so I turn the grill on. "Any newspapers?" I ask.

"Newspapers? Why?"

"I have to book a flight. I'm taking a week's leave next Monday, and it's already Wednesday."

"Going anywhere interesting?"

"Amsterdam."

"Cool!" There's a pair of fur-lined handcuffs on the breadboard. Pinky picks them up and eyes them critically, then starts polishing them on a square of kitchen roll. "Party on?"

"I have some research to do at the Oostindischehuis. And in the basement of the Rijksmuseum."

"Research." He rolls his eyes and tucks the handcuffs into a belt clip. "What a *boring* use for a holiday in Amsterdam!"

I chop bits of pork sausage up and sprinkle them over my garbage pizza, oblivious. The cellar door swings open. "Did somebody mention Amsterdam – hey, what are *you* doing here?"

I drop my knife. "Mo? What are *you*—"

"Bob? Hey, have you guys met?"

"'Scuse me, would you mind moving? I need to get through—"

With four people in the kitchen it's distinctly cosy, not to say crowded. I move my pizza up under the grill and switch the kettle on again. "Who put you up here?" I ask Mo.

"The Plumbers – they said this was a secure apartment," she says, rubbing the side of her nose. She peers at me suspiciously. "What's going on?"

"It *is* a secure apartment," I say slowly. "It's on the Laundry list."

"Bob's girlfriend just moved out for the fourth time," Pinky explains helpfully. "They must have thought the spare room needed filling."

"Oh, this is too much." Mo pulls out a chair and sits down with her back against the wall, arms crossed defensively.

"Guys?" I ask, "could you take it outside?"

"Certainly," Brains sniffs, and disappears back into the cellar.

Pinky smiles. "I knew you'd hit it off!" he says, then ducks hastily out of the room.

A minute later the front door slams. Mo fixes me with a magistrate's stare. "You live here. With those two."

"Yeah." I inspect the grill. "They're mostly harmless, when they're not trying to take over the world each night."

"Trying to—" she stops. "That one. Uh, Pinky? He's out clubbing?"

"Yes, but he never brings any rough trade home," I explain. "He and Brains have been together for, oh, as long as I've known them."

"*Oh.*" I see the light bulb go on above her head: some people are a bit slow on the uptake about Pinky and Brains.

"Brains doesn't get out a lot. Pinky is a party animal, a bit of rubber, a bit of leather. Every few weeks, whenever the moon is in the right phase, hairs burst from the palms of his hands and he turns into a wild bear with a compulsion to terrorise Soho. Brains doesn't seem to notice. They're like an old married couple. Once a year Pinky drags Brains out to Pride so he can maintain his security clearance."

"I *see*." She relaxes a little but looks puzzled. "I thought the secret services sacked you for being homosexual?"

"They used to, said it made you a security risk. Which was silly, because it was the practice of firing homosexuals that made them vulnerable to blackmail in the first place. So these days they just insist on openness – the theory is you can only be blackmailed if you're hiding

something. Which is why the Brains gets the day off for Gay Pride to maintain his security clearance."

"Ah – I give up." She smiles. The smile fades fast. "I've still got to move my stuff in. They're packing up the flat and I didn't have much anyway, most of my furniture is in a shipping container somewhere on the Atlantic… Why Amsterdam, Bob?"

I prod at the pizza, which is beginning to melt on top as the grill strains to heat it up. "I've been doing a bit of digging." I wince: my rib stabs at me. "Things you said last night. Oh, has anyone said anything to you?"

"No." She looks puzzled.

"Well, don't be surprised if in the next couple of days Andy or Derek drops by and gets you to sign a piece of paper saying that you'll cut your own throat before talking to anyone without clearance. That's what they did to me; they're taking it seriously."

"Well *that's* a relief," she says with heavy irony. "Did you learn anything?"

The pizza is bubbling away on top; I turn the grill down so that it can heat right through. "Coffee?"

"Tea, if you've got it."

"Okay. Um, I did some reading. Did you know that what you overheard is completely impossible? As in, it can't happen because it's not allowed?"

"It's not – hang on." She glares at me. "If you're pulling my leg—"

"Would I do a thing like that?" I must look the image of hurt innocence because she chuckles wickedly.

"I wouldn't put anything past you, Bob. Okay, what do you mean by 'It's not allowed?' As your professor I am ordering you to tell me everything."

"Uh, isn't it my job to say, 'Tell me, professor'?"

She waves it off: "Nah, that would be a cliché. So tell me. What the fornicating hell is happening? Why does someone or something try to render me metabolically incompetent whenever I meet you?"

"Well, it goes back to around 1919," I say, dropping tea bags into a chipped pot. "That was when the Thule Gessellschaft was founded in Munich by Baron von Sebottendorff. The Thule society were basically mystical whack-jobs, but they had a lot of clout; in particular they were heavily into Masonic symbolism and a load of post-Theosophical guff about how the only true humans were the Aryan race, and the rest –

the *Mindwertigen*, 'inferior beings' – were sapping their strength and purity and precious bodily fluids. All of this wouldn't have mattered much except a bunch of these goons were mixed up in Bavarian street politics, the Freikorps and so on. They sort of cross-fertilised with a small outfit called the NSDAP, whose leader was a former NCO and agent provocateur sent by the Landswehr to keep an eye on far-right movements. He picked up a lot of ideas from the Thule Society and when he got where he wanted he told the head of his personal bodyguard – a guy called Heinrich Himmler, another occult obsessive – to put Walter Darre, one of Alfred Rosenberg's protégés, in charge of the Ahnenerbe Society. Ahnenerbe was originally independent, but rapidly turned into a branch of the SS after 1934; a sort of occult R&D department cum training college. Meanwhile the Gestapo orchestrated a pretty severe crack down on all non-party occultists in the Third Reich; Adolf wanted a monopoly on esoteric power, and he got it."

I switch off the grill. "All this would have amounted to exactly zip except that some nameless spark in the Ahnenerbe research arm unearthed David Hilbert's unpublished Last Question. And from there to the Wannsee Conference was just a short step."

"Hilbert, Wannsee – you've lost me. What did the calculus of variations have to do with Wannsee, wherever that is?"

"Wrong question, right Hilbert; it's not one of the Twenty-Three Questions on unsolved problems in mathematics, it's something he did later. Thing is, Hilbert was experimenting with some very odd ideas towards the end, before he died in 1943. He'd more or less pioneered functional analysis, he came up with Hilbert Space – obviously – and he was working towards a 'proof theory' in the mid-thirties, a theory for formally proving the correctness of theorems. Yeah, I know, Gödel holed that one under the waterline in 1931. Anyhow, you know Hilbert's published work dropped off sharply in the 1930s and he didn't publish *anything* in the 1940s? And yes, he'd read Turing's doctoral thesis. Do I need to draw you a diagram? No? Good.

"Now, Wannsee... that was the conference in late 1941 that set the Final Solution in motion. Before then, it was mostly an al fresco atrocity – *Einsatzgruppen*, mobile murder units, running around behind the front line machine-gunning people. It was the Ahnenerbe-SS, with the Numerical Analysis Department founded on the back of that unpublished work by Hilbert – he pointedly refused to cooperate any further

once he realised what was going on, by the way – which provided the seed for the Wannsee Invocation. The Wannsee conference was attended by delegates from about twenty different Nazi organisations and ministries. It set up the organisation of the Final Solution. The Ahnenerbe ran it behind the scenes, using Karl Adolf Eichmann – at the time, head of Section IV B4 of the Reich Main Security Office – as organisational head, a kind of Nazi equivalent of General Leslie Groves. In the USA, General Groves was a Corps of Engineers officer; he organised the massive logistical and infrastructure mobilisation needed to build the Manhattan Project. In Vienna, Eichman, an SS *Obersturmbannfuhrer*, was in charge of providing raw material for the largest necromantic invocation in human history.

"The goal of the what the Ahnenerbe called Project Jotunheim, and what everyone else calls the Wannsee Invocation, was what we'd today designate the opening of a Class 4 gate – a large, bidirectional bridge to another universe where the commutative operation, opening gates back to our own, is substantially easier. A bridge big enough to take tanks, bombers, U-boats. Can you spell 'counterstrike'? We're not sure quite what their constraint requirements were, or what the Wannsee Invocation was intended to accomplish, but they'd have been pretty drastic; Wannsee cost the Nazi state a greater proportion of its wealth than the Manhattan Project cost the US, and would have had similar or bigger military implications if they'd succeeded. Of course, their spell was grotesquely unoptimised; you could probably do it with a budget of a million pounds for equipment and only use a couple of sacrifices if you had a proper understanding of the theory. They tried to do a brute-force attack on the problem, and failed – especially when the Allies got wind of it and bombed the crap out of the big soul-capacitors at Peenumunde. But that's not the point. They failed, and those deaths, all ten million or so of the people they murdered in the extermination camps that fed the death spell, didn't suffice to pull their heads out of the noose."

Mo shivers. "That's *horrible*." She stands up and walks over to inspect the tea. "Hmm, needs more milk." She leans against the counter next to me. "I can't believe Hilbert would have cooperated with the Nazis willingly on that kind of project."

"He didn't. And when the allies found out they, um, demilitarised Germany with extreme prejudice. In the occult field, anyway. None of the Ahnenerbe-SS researchers from the Numerical Analysis Division

survived; if the SOE death squads didn't get them, it was the OSS or the NKVD. That's what the Helsinki Protocol was about: *nobody* wanted to see systematic mass murder of civilians adopted as a technique in strategic warfare, especially given some of the more unpleasant and extreme effects the weapon Ahnenerbe-SS were working on could give rise to. Like collapsing the false vacuum or letting vastly superhuman alien intelligences gain access to our universe. This stuff made atom bombs and ballistic missiles look harmless."

"Oh." She pauses. "Which is why what happened to me is impossible, right? I think I begin to see. Curiouser and curiouser…"

"I'm going to Amsterdam next Monday, soon as I've booked a flight," I say slowly. "Want to come along?"

I feel like a real shit. Andy told me I would, and Angleton ground the message home; but it doesn't help any as I tell her half the reasons why I'm going to Amsterdam – the half she's cleared for.

"The Reijksmuseum has an interesting basement," I say lightly. "It's off-limits to civ— to people who don't have need-to-know on the Helsinki Protocols. Thing is, Holland is part of the EUINTEL agreement, a treaty group that provides for joint suppression operations directed against paranormal threats. I'm not allowed to visit the USA on business without a specific invitation, but Amsterdam is home territory. As long as it's official and I've established a liaison relationship I can call for backup and expect to get it. And if I want to examine the basement library, well, it's the best collated set of Ahnenerbe-SS memorabilia and records this side of Yad Vashem."

"So if you get a hankering to go look at some old masters and disappear through a side door for a couple of hours—"

"Exactly."

"Bullshit, Bob." She frowns at me, eyebrows furrowing. "You've just been lecturing me about the history of this bunch of Nazi necromancers. You obviously think there's some connection with the Middle Eastern guys in Santa Cruz, the one with the weird eyes and the German accent. Your flatmates have just been telling me how safe this house is, and how all the wards have just been updated. If you're afraid of something, why not just sit tight at home?"

I shrug. "Well, leaving aside that the bastards seem to want you for something – I'm not sure. Look, there's some other stuff I'm not allowed to talk about, but right now Amsterdam looks like the right place to

be, if I want to find these idiots before they try and kidnap you again."

I pull the grill tray out and slide my garbage pizza onto a plate. "Slice of pizza?"

"Yes, thank you."

I cut the thing in two pieces and slide one onto another plate, pass it to her. "Look, there's a connection between those goons who kidnapped you in Santa Cruz and something my boss has been keeping an eye on for a couple of years. It turns out that they're connected to the Mukhabarat, the Iraqi secret police: there's a proliferation spin on the whole thing, rogue state trying to get its hands on weapons forbidden by treaty. Right?" She nods, mouth too full to reply. "From that perspective, kidnapping you makes perfect sense. What I don't understand is the sacrifice bit. Or the attempt to kill you. It just doesn't make sense if it's simply a Mukhabarat technology transfer deal. Those guys are vicious but they're not idiots."

I take a deep breath. "No, the trouble you've got is something related to the Ahnenerbe-SS's legacy. Which is deep, dark, shit. I wouldn't put it beyond Saddam Hussein to be dealing in such things – the Ba'ath party of Iraq explicitly modelled their security apparatus on the Third Reich, and they've got a real down on Jews – but it puzzles me. I mean, the possessed guy you saw who wasn't in the flat when the Black Chamber SWAT team stormed it – was he something to do with the Mukhabarat or one of their proxies summoning up some psychotic Nazi death magic or something? If so, the question is who they are, and the answer may be buried in the Rijksmuseum basement. Oh, and there's one other thing."

"Oh? What would that be?"

I can't look her in the eye; I just can't. "My boss says he'd value your insight. On an informal basis."

Which is only half the truth. What I *really* want to say to her is: *it's you they're after. As long as you're here in a Laundry safe house they can't get to you. But if we trail you in front of them, in the middle of a city that happens to be the Mukhabarat's headquarters for Western Europe, we might be able to draw them out. Get them to try again, under the guns of a friendly team. Be our tethered goat, Mo?* But I'm chicken. I don't have the guts to ask her to bait my hook. I hold my tongue and I feel about six inches tall, and in my imagination I can see Andy and Derek nodding silent approval, and it still doesn't help. "Given enough pairs of eyes, all problems are transparent," I say, falling back on platitudes. "Besides,

it's a great city. We could maybe study etchings together, or something."

"You need to work on your pick-up lines," Mo observes, yanking a particularly limp segment of pizza base loose and holding it up. "But for the sake of argument, consider me charmed. How much will this trip cost?"

"Ah, now that's the good bit." I drain my mug and push it away from me. "There aren't many perks that come from working for the Laundry, but one of them is that it happens to be possible to get a cheap travel pass. Special arrangement with BA, apparently. All we have to pay is the airport tax and our hotel bill. Know any decent B&Bs out there?"

6. The Atrocity Archives

Three days flick by like microfiche cards through the input hopper of Angleton's Memex. Mo has settled into the vacant room on the second floor of our safe house like a long-term resident; as a not very senior academic, her Ph.D. years not long behind her, she probably spent years in flat-shares like this. I focus on my day-to-day work, fixing broken network servers, running a security audit of some service department's kit (two illicit copies of Minesweeper and one MP3 music jukebox to eliminate), and spending the afternoons up in the secure office in the executive suite, learning the bible of field operations by heart. I try not to think about what I'm getting Mo into. In fact, I try not to see her at all, spending long hours into the evening poring over arcane regulations and petty incantations for coordinating joint task-force operations. I feel more than a little bit guilty, even though I'm only obeying orders, and consequently I feel a little bit depressed.

At least Mhari doesn't try to get in touch.

The Sunday before we're due to leave I have to stay home because I need to pack my bags. I'm dithering over a stack of T-shirts and an electric toothbrush when someone knocks on my bedroom door. "Bob?"

I open it. "Mo."

She steps inside, hesitant, eyes scanning. My room often has that effect on people. It's not the usual single male scattering of clothes on every available surface – aggravated by my packing – so much as the groaning, double-stacked bookcase and the stuff on the walls. Not many guys have anatomically correct life-sized plastic skeletons hanging

from a wall bracket. Or a desk made out of Lego bricks, with the bits of three half-vivisected computers humming and chattering to each other on top of it.

"Are you packing?" she asks, smiling brightly at me, and I cringe slightly; she's dressed up for a night out with some lucky bastard, and here's me wondering when I last changed my T-shirt and looking forward to a close encounter with a slice of toast and a tin of baked beans. But the embarrassment only lasts for a moment, until her wandering gaze settles in the direction of the bookcase. Then, "Is that a copy of Knuth?" She homes in on the top shelf. "Hang on – volume *four*? But he only finished the first three volumes in that series! Volume four's been overdue for the past twenty years!"

"Yup." I nod, smugly. Whoever she's dating won't have anything like *that* on his shelves. "We – or the Black Chamber – have a little agreement with him; he doesn't publish volume four of *The Art of Computer Programming*, and they don't render him metabolically challenged. At least, he doesn't publish it to the public; it's the one with the Turing Theorem in it. Phase Conjugate Grammars for Extra-dimensional Summoning. This is a very limited edition – numbered and classified."

"That's—" she frowns. "May I borrow it? To read?"

"You're on the inside now; just don't leave it on the bus."

She pulls the book down, shoves a bundle of crumpled jeans to one side of my bed to make room, and perches on the end of it. Mo in dress-up mode turns out to be a grownup designer version of hippie crossed with Goth; black velvet skirt, silver bangles, ethnic top. Not quite self-consciously pre-Raphaelite, but nearly. Right now she's destroying the effect completely by being one hundred percent focused on the tome. "Wow." Her eyes are alight. "I just wanted to see if you were, like, getting ready? Only now I don't want to go; I'm going to be up all night!"

"Just remember we need to be out the door by seven o'clock," I remind her. "Allow two hours for getting to Luton and check-in…"

"I'll sleep on the plane." She closes the book and puts it down, but keeps one hand on the cover, protectively close. Looks at me: "I haven't seen you around much, Bob. Been busy?"

"More than you can imagine," I say. Setting up scanners that will slurp through the Laundry's UPI and Reuters news feeds and page me if anything interesting comes up while I'm away. Reading the manual

for field operations. Avoiding my guilty conscience… "How about you?"

She pulls a face. "There's so *much* stuff buried in the stacks, it's unbelievable. I've been spending all my time reading, getting indigestion along the way. It's just such a waste – all that stuff, locked up behind the Official Secrets Act!"

"Yeah, well." It's my turn to pull a face, now. "In principle, I kind of agree with you. In practice… how to put it? This stuff has repercussions. The many-angled ones live at the bottom of the Mandelbrot set; play around with it for too long and horrible things can happen to you." I shrug. "And you know what students are like."

"Yes, well." She stands up, picking up her skirt with one hand and the book with the other: "I suppose you've got more experience of that than I have. But, well." She pauses, and gives a little half-smile: "I was wondering if, if you'd eaten yet?"

Ah. Suddenly I figure it out! I'm *so* thick. "Give me half an hour?" I ask. *Where the hell did I leave that shirt?* "Anywhere in particular take your fancy?"

"There's a little bistro on the high street that I was meaning to check out. If you're ready in half an hour?"

"Downstairs," I say firmly. "Half an hour!" She slips out of my room and I waste half a minute drooling at the back of the door before I snap out of it and go in search of something to wear that doesn't look too shopsoiled. The sudden realisation that Mo might actually enjoy my company is a better antidepressant than anything I could get on prescription.

I'm brought to my senses by the shrill of my alarm clock: it's eight in the morning, the sky's still dark outside, my head aches, and I'm feeling inexplicably happy for someone who this afternoon will be baiting the trap for an unknown enemy.

I pull on my clothes, grab my bags, head downstairs still yawning vigorously. Mo is in the kitchen, red-eyed and nursing a mug of coffee; there's a huge, travel-stained backpack in the hall. "Been up all night with the book?" I ask. She was thinking about it all through what was otherwise a really enjoyable quiet night out.

"Here. Help yourself." She points to the cafetière. She yawns. "This is *all* your fault." I glance at her in time to catch a brief grin. "Ready to go?"

"After this." I pour a mug, add milk, shudder, yawn again, and begin to work on it. "Somehow I'm not hungry this morning."

"I think that place goes on the visit-again list," she agrees. "I must try the couscous next time…" She mounts another attack on her mug and I decide that she's just as attractive wearing jeans and sweat shirt and no war-paint first thing in the morning as in the evening. I'll pass on the red eyes, though. "Got your passport?"

"Um. Yeah. And the tickets. Shall we go?"

"Lead on."

Some hours later we've dropped off the end of Arrivals at Schiphol, caught the train to Centraal Station, grappled with the trams, and checked into a cutesy family-run hotel with a theme of hot and cold running philosophers – Hegel on the breakfast room place mats, Mo in the Plato room on the top floor, and myself relegated to the Kant basement. By early afternoon we're walking in the Vondelpark, between the dark green grass and the overcast grey sky: a cool wind is blowing in off the channel and for the first time I'm able to get the traffic fumes out of my lungs. And we're out of sight of Nick and Alan who, until the hotel, tailed us all the way from the safe house to the airport and then onto our flight – I suppose they're part of the surveillance team. It's bad practice to acknowledge their presence and they made no attempt to talk to me; as far as I can tell, Mo doesn't suspect anything.

"So where is this museum, then?" Mo asks.

"Right there." I point. At one end of the park, a neoclassical lump of stonework rears itself pompously towards the sky. "Let's check in and get our restricted area passes validated, huh? Give it an hour or so and we can try and find somewhere to eat."

"Only a couple of hours?"

"Everywhere closes early in Amsterdam, except the bars and coffee shops," I explain. "But don't go in a coffee shop and order a coffee or they'll laugh at you. What we call a café is an *Eethuis*, and what they call a café we call a pub. Got it?"

"Clear as mud." She shakes her head. "Good thing for me everyone seems to speak English."

"It's a common affliction." I pause. "Just don't, um, let it make you feel too secure. This isn't a safe house."

We walk past a verdigris-covered statue while she considers this. "You have another agenda for coming here," she says finally.

My guts feel cold. "Yes," I admit. I've been dreading this moment.

"Well." Unexpectedly she reaches out and takes my hand. "I assume you're prepared for the shit to hit the fan, right?"

"All feco-ventilatory intersections are covered. They assure me."

"*They*." She shrugs, uncomfortably. "This was their idea?"

I glance round, keeping a vague eye on the other wanderers in the park: a couple of elderly pensioner types, a kid on a skateboard, that's about it. Of course that doesn't mean we aren't being tailed – a raven that's had its central nervous system hijacked by a daemonic imperative, a micro-UAV cruising silent a hundred metres overhead with cameras focused – but at least you can do something about human tradecraft, as opposed to the esoteric or electronic kinds.

"They're not keen on, on letting whoever's tracking you get a chance to say 'third time lucky'," I try to explain. "This is a setup. We're on friendly territory and if anyone tries to grab you, I'm not the only one on your case."

"That's nice to know." I look at her sharply but she's got her innocent face on, the absent-minded professor musing over a theorem rather than focusing on the world, the flesh, and the devils of Interpol's most-wanted list.

"You never did tell me about the *Thresher*," I comment as we cross the road to the museum.

"Oh, what? The submarine? I didn't think you were interested."

"Huh." I lead her along the side of the building instead of climbing the steps, and I keep an eye open for the side entrance I'm looking for. "Of course I'm interested."

"I was kidding, you know." She flashes me a grin. "Wanted to see if it would make you pull your finger out. You spooks are just so *focused*."

There's a blank door set between two monolithic granite slabs that form one flank of the museum; I rap on it thrice and it opens inwards automatically. (There's a camera in the ceiling of this entrance tunnel: unwanted visitors will not be made welcome.) "What *is* this?" Mo asks, "Hey, that's the first secret door I've seen!"

"Nah, it's just the service entrance," I say. The door closes behind us and I lead her forward, round a bend, and up to the security desk. "Howard and O'Brien, from the Laundry," I say, placing my hand on the counter.

The booth is empty, but there are two badges waiting on the counter and the door ahead of us opens anyway. "Welcome to the Archive,"

says a speaker behind the counter. "Please take your ID badges and wear them at all times except when visiting the public galleries."

I take them and pass one to Mo. She inspects it dubiously. "Is this solid silver? What's the language? This isn't Dutch."

"It probably came from Indonesia. Don't ask, just wear it." I pin mine on my belt, under the hem of my T-shirt – it doesn't need to be visible to human guards, after all. "Coming?"

"Yeah."

The cellars under the Rijksmuseum remind me of an upmarket version of the Stacks at Dansey House – huge tunnels, white-washed and air-conditioned, chock-full of shelves. There's a difference: almost all the contents at Dansey House are files. Here there are boxes, plastic or wooden, full of evidence. Left over from the trials that followed a time of infinite horrors.

The Ahnenerbe-SS collection is in a sub-basement guarded by locked steel doors; one of the curators – a civilian in jeans and sweater – takes us down there. "Don't you be staying too long," she advises us. "This place, it gives me creeps: you not sleeping well tonight, yah?"

"We'll be alright," I reassure her. The Ahnenerbe collection has about the strongest set of guards and wards imaginable – nobody involved in looking after it wants to worry about lunatics and neo-Nazis getting their hands on some of the powerfully charged relics stored here.

"You say." She looks at me blackly, then one eyebrow twitches: "Sweet dreams."

"Just what are we looking for?" Mo asks.

"Well, to start with—" I clap my hands. We're facing a corridor with numbered storage rooms off to either side. It's well lit and empty, like a laboratory where everyone has just nipped out for afternoon tea. "The symbols painted on the walls of the apartment in Santa Cruz," I say. "Think you'd recognise them if you saw them again?"

"Recognise? I, uh… maybe," she says slowly. "I wouldn't like to say for sure. I was half out of my head and I didn't get a real good look at them."

"That's more than I got, and the Black Chamber didn't send us any postcards," I say. "Which is why we've come here. Think of it as a photo-fit session for necromancy." I read the plaque on the nearest door, then push it open. The lights come on automatically, and I freeze. It's a good thing the lights are bright, because the contents of the room, seen in

shadow, would be heart-stopping. As it is, they're merely heart-breaking.

There's a white cast-iron table, a thing of curves and scrollwork, just inside the doorway. Three chairs sit around it, delicate-looking white assemblies of struts and curved sections. I blink, for there's something odd about them: something that reminds me of the art of Giger, the film set of *Alien*. And then I realise what I'm looking at: the backs of the chairs are vertebrae, wired together. The chairs are made of scrimshaw, carved from the thigh bones of the dead; the decorative scrollwork of the table is a rack of human ribs. The tabletop itself is made of polished, interlocking shoulder blades. And as for the cigarette-lighter—

"I think I'm going to be sick," whispers Mo. She looks distinctly pale.

"Toilet's down the corridor," I bite out, gritting my teeth while she hurries away, retching, I take in the rest of the room. *They're right*, I think in some quiet, rational recess of my mind: *some things you just can't tell the public about*. The Holocaust, even at arm's length through newsreel footage, was bad enough to brand the collective unconscious of the West with a scar of indelible evil, madness on an inconceivable scale. Hideous enough that some people seek to deny it ever happened. But *this*, this isn't something you can even begin to describe: this is the dark nightmare of a diseased mind.

There were medical laboratories attached to the death camp at Birkenau. Some of their tools are stored here. There were other, darker, laboratories behind the medical unit: and their tools are stored here too, those that have not been destroyed in accordance with the requirements of disarmament treaties.

Next to the charnel house garden furniture sits a large rack of electronics, connected to a throne of timber with metal straps at ankle and wrist – an electric chair; the Ahnenerbe experimented with the destruction of human souls, seeking a way to sear through the Cartesian bottleneck and exterminate not only the bodies of their victims, but the informational echoes of their consciousness. Only the difficulty of extinguishing souls on a mass production basis kept it from featuring prominently in their schemes.

Beyond the soul-eater there's a classical mediaeval iron maiden, except that the torturers of the Thirty Years War didn't get to play with aluminium alloy and hydraulic rams. There are other machines, all

designed to maim and kill with a maximum of agony: one of them, a bizarre cross between a printing-press and a rack made of glass, seems to have materialised from a nightmare of Kafka's—

They were trying to generate pain, I realize. They weren't simply killing their victims but deliberately *hurting* them in the process, hurting them as badly as the human body can stand, squeezing the pain out of them like an evil seepage of blood, hurting them again and again until all the pain has been extracted—

I'm sitting down but I don't remember how I got here. I feel dizzy: Mo is standing over me. "Bob?" I close my eyes and try to control my breathing. "Bob?"

"I need a minute," I hear myself saying.

The room reeks of old, dead, terror: and a brooding malevolence, as if the instruments of torture are merely biding their time. *Just you wait*, they're saying. I shudder, open my eyes, and try to stand up.

"This was what the, the Ahnenerbe, used?" Mo asks. She sounds hoarse.

I nod, not trusting my voice. It's a moment before I can speak. "The secret complex. Behind the medical block at Birkenau, where they experimented with pain. Algemancy. They took Zuse's Z-2 computer, you know? It was supposed to have been bombed by the allies, in Berlin. That was what Zuse himself was told, he was away at the time. But they took it…" I swallow. "It's in the next room."

"A computer? I didn't know they had them."

"Only just; Konrad Zuse built his first programmable computer in 1940. He independently invented the things: after the war he founded Zuse Computer Company, which was taken over by Siemens in the early sixties. He wasn't a bad man; when he didn't cooperate they stole his machine, demolished the house where he had built it and blamed the destruction on an allied bomb. The cabbalistic iterations, you see – they rebuilt it at Sobibor camp, using circuits soldered with gold extracted from the teeth of their victims." I stand up and head for the door. "I'll show you, but that's not really why we're… hell. I'll show you."

The next room in the Atrocity Archive contains the remains of the Z-2. Old nineteen-inch equipment racks tower ceiling-high; there are mounds of vacuum tubes visible through gaps in the front-panels, dials and gauges to monitor power consumption and plug-boards to load programs into the beast. All very homely, until you see the printer that lurks in the shadowy recess at the back of the room. "Here they ran

the phase-state calculations that dictated the killing schedule, opening and closing circuits in time to the ebb and flow of murder. They even generated the railway timetables with this computer, synchronising deliveries of victims to the maw of the machine." I walk towards the printer, look round to see Mo waiting behind me. "This printer." It's a plotter, motors dragging an Ouija-board pen across a sheet of – it would have been parchment, but not from a cow or a sheep. I swallow bile. "They used it to inscribe the geometry curves that were to open the way of Dho-Na. All very, very advanced: this was the first real use of computers in magic, you know."

Mo backs away from the machines. Her face is a white mask under the overhead strip lighting. "Why are you showing me this?"

"The patterns are in the next room." I follow her out into the corridor and take her by the elbow, gently steering towards the third chamber – where the real Archive begins. It's a homely-looking room, full of the sort of file drawers you find in architects' offices – very shallow, very wide, designed to hold huge, flat blueprints. I pull the top drawer of the nearest cabinet out and show her. "Look. Seen anything like this before?" It's very fine parchment inscribed with what looks like a collision between a mandala, a pentagram, and a circuit diagram, drawn in bluish ink. At the front and left, a neat box-out in engineering script details the content of the blueprint. If I didn't know what it was meant to be, or what the parchment was made of, I'd think it was quite pretty. I take care not to touch the thing.

"It's – yes." She traces one of the curves with a fingertip, carefully holding it an inch above the inscription. "No, it wasn't this one. But it's similar."

"There are several thousand more like this in here," I say, studying her expression. "I'd like to see if we can identify the one you saw on the wall?" She nods, uneasily. "We don't have to do it right now," I admit. "If you would rather we took a breather there's a cafe upstairs where we can have a cup of coffee and relax a bit first—"

"No." She pauses for a moment. "Let's get it over and done with." She glances over her shoulder and shudders slightly. "I don't want to stay down here any longer than I have to."

About two hours later, while Mo is halfway through the contents of drawer number fifty-two, my pager goes off. I scrabble at the waistband of my jeans in a momentary panic then pull the thing out.

One of the newsgreppers I left running on the network servers back home has paged me: in its constant trawl through the wire feeds it's come across something interesting. *KILLING IN ROTTERDAM*, it says, followed by a reference number.

"Got to go upstairs," I say, "think you'll be okay here for twenty minutes?"

Mo looks at me with eyes like bruises. "I'll take you up on that coffee break if you don't mind."

"Not at all. Not having much luck?"

"Nothing so far." She yawns, catches herself, and shakes her head. "My attention span is going. Oh god, coffee! I never realised it was possible to be horrified and bored out of your skin at the same time."

I refrain from calling her on the unintentional pun: instead I make a note of where she's got up to – at this rate we could be here for another week, unless we get lucky – and slide the drawer shut. "Okay. Time out."

The coffee shop is upstairs, attached to the museum shop; it's all whitewash and neat little tables and there's a stand with patisseries on it next to the counter. All very homely. A row of cheap PC's along one wall offer internet access for the compulsives who can't kick their habit for a day of high culture. I home in on one and begin the tedious process of logging into one of the Laundry's servers by way of three firewalls, two passwords, an encrypted tunnel, and an S/Key challenge. At the end of the day I'm onto a machine that isn't exactly trusted – the Laundry will not allow classified servers to be connected on the net, by any arrangement of wires or wishful thinking – but that happens to run my news trawler. Which, after all, is fishing in the shallow waters of Reuters and UPI, rather than the oceanic chasm of state secrets.

So what made my pager go off? While Mo is drinking a mug full of Mocha and contemplating the museum's catalogue of forthcoming attractions, I find myself reading an interesting article from the AP wire service. *DOUBLE KILLING IN ROTTERDAM (AP)*: two bodies discovered near a burned-out shipping container in the port appear to be victims of a brutal gangland-style slaying. Blood daubed on the container, victims – ah, a correlation with a restricted information source, something sucked out of the Police National Computer and not available in the usual wire service bulletin. One victim is a known neo-Nazi, the other an Iraqi national, both shot with the same gun. *Is that all?* I wonder, and go clickety-click, sending out a brief email asking

where was the shipping container sent from and where was it bound for because you never know…

I shake my head. The article dinged my search filter's 'phone home' bell by accumulating little keyword matches until it passed a threshold, not because it's obviously important. But something nags at the back of my mind: there's seawater nearby, graffiti in blood on the wall, an Iraqi connection. *Why Rotterdam?* Well, it's one of the main container-port gateways into Europe, that's for starters. For seconds, it's less than fifty kilometres away.

There's no other real news. I log out and leave the terminal: time to drink a coffee and get back to work.

Three hours later: "Found it," she says.

I look up from the report I'm reading. "Are you sure?"

"Certain." I stand up and walk over. She's leaning over an open drawer and her arms are tense as wires. I think she'd be shaking if she wasn't holding herself still and stiff. I look over her shoulder. The drawing is a geometry curve alright. Actually, I've seen ones like this before. The aborted summoning Dr Vohlman demonstrated in front of the class that day – was it only a few weeks ago? – looked quite similar. But that one was designed to open a constrained information channel to one of the infernal realms. I can't quite see where this one is directed, at least not without taking it home and studying it with the aid of a protractor and a calculator, but a quick glance tells me it's more than a simple speakerphone to hell.

Here we see a differential that declares a function of tau, the rate of change of time with distance along one of the Planck dimensions. *There* we see an admonition that this circuit is not to be completed without a cage around it. (A good thing the notation we use, and that of the Ahnenerbe, is derived from the same source, or I wouldn't be able to figure it out.) *This* formula looks surprisingly modern, it's some sort of curve through the complex number plane – each point along it is a different Julia set. And *That* is where the human sacrifice is wired into the diagram by its eyeballs while still alive, for maximum bandwidth—

I blank for a second, flashing on the evil elegance of the design. "Are you *sure* this is it?" I mumble.

"Of course I'm sure!" Mo snaps at me. "Do you think I'd—" she stops. Takes a deep breath. Mutters something quietly to herself, then, "What *is* it?"

"I'm not one hundred percent certain," I say, carefully putting the notepad I was reading from down on my chair and moving to one side so I can inspect the diagram from a different angle, "but it looks like a resonator map. A circuit designed to, uh, tune in on another universe. This one is similar to our own, in fact it's astonishingly close by: the energy barrier you have to tunnel through to reach it is high enough that nothing less than a human sacrifice will do."

"Human sacrifice?"

"It doesn't take much energy to talk to a demon," I explain. "They're pretty much waiting to hear from us, at least the ones people mostly want to talk to. But they come from a long way away – from universes with a very weak affinity to our own. Information leakage doesn't imply an energy change in our own world; it's concealed in the random noise. But if we try to talk to a universe close to home there's a huge potential energy barrier to overcome – this sort-of prevents causality violations. The whole thing is mediated by intelligence – observers are required to collapse the wave function – which is where the sacrifice comes in: we're eliminating an observer. Done correctly, this lets us talk to a universe that isn't so much next door as lying adjacent to our own, separated by a gap less than the Planck length."

"Ow." She points at the map. "So this thing… it's a very precise transformation through the Mandelbrot set. Which you guys have used as a map onto a Linde continuum, right? Why don't they just set up an n-dimensional homogeneous matrix transformation? It's so much more intuitively obvious."

"Uh—" She manages to surprise me at the damnedest times. "I don't know. Have to read up on it, I guess."

"Well." She pauses for an instant and looks very slightly disappointed, is if her star pupil has just failed a verbal test. "This is very like what I saw. Got any suggestions for what to do next, wise guy?"

"Yes. There's a photocopier upstairs. Let's call the curator and run off a copy or two. Then we can get someone back home to compare it to the photographs of the shipping container at that murder site in Rotterdam. If they're similar we have a connection."

Our hotel has a bijou bar, and a breakfast room, but no restaurant; so it seems natural that after running off our copies we should go home, head for our respective rooms, freshen up, and head out on

the town to find somewhere to eat. (And maybe share a drink or two: those hours in the basement of horrors are going to give me bad dreams tonight, and I'd be surprised if Mo is any better.) I spend half an hour soaking in the bathtub with a copy of *Surreal Calculus and the Navigation of Everett-Wheeler Continua* – hoping to brush up my dinner-table patter – then dry myself, pull on a clean pair of chinos and an open-necked shirt, and head downstairs.

Mo is waiting at the bar with a cup of coffee and a copy of the *Herald Tribune*: she's wearing the same evening-out-on-the-town outfit as last time. She folds the newspaper and nods at me. "Want to try that Indonesian place we passed?" I ask her.

"Why not?" She finishes the coffee quickly. "Is it raining outside?"

"Wasn't last time I looked."

She stands up gracefully and pulls her coat on. "Let's go."

The nights are drawing in, and the evening air is cool and damp. I'm still self-conscious about navigating around the roads – not only do they run on the wrong side, they've got separate bike lanes everywhere, and to make matters worse separate tram lanes that sometimes don't go in the same direction as the rest of the traffic. It makes crossing the road an exercise in head-twitching, and I nearly get mown down by a girl on a bicycle riding without lights in the dusk – but we make it to the tram stop more or less intact, and Mo doesn't laugh at me out loud. "Do you always jerk around like that?"

"Only when I'm trying to avoid the feral, man-eating mopeds. Is this tram – ah." Two stops later we get off and head for that Indonesian place we passed earlier. They have a vacant table, and we have a meal.

I turn on my new palmtop's antisound and Mo talks to me over her satay: "Was that what you were hoping to find, at the museum?"

I dribble peanut sauce over a skewer before replying. "It was what I was hoping *not* to find, really." She has her back to the plate-glass window and I have a decent view of the main road behind her shoulder. Which is important and I keep glancing that way because I am on edge – our friendly neighbourhood abductors seem to go to work at dusk, and when all's said and done this is a stake-out and Mo is the goat. I look back at her. She's very decorative, for a goat: most goats don't wear ethnic tops, large silver earrings, and friendly expressions. "On the other hand, at least we know we're dealing with something profoundly unpleasant. Which means that *Carnate Gecko* gets something solid to chew on and we've got a lead to follow up."

"Assuming it doesn't follow *us* up instead." Her expression clouds over in an instant. "Tell me the truth, Bob?"

My mouth turns dry; this is a moment I've been dreading even more than the discovery in the basement. "What?"

"Why are they after me?"

Oh, *that* truth. I manage to breathe again. "Your… research. And the stuff you were really working on in the States."

"You know about that." She looks tense and I suddenly wonder: How many secrets are we keeping from each other?

"Angleton told me about it. Black Chamber notified us when they deported you. Don't look so startled. About the restricted theoretical work on probability manipulation – lucky vectors, fate quantisation? It's all classified, but it's not – no, what I mean to say is, they don't like us running around on their turf, but information sharing goes on at different levels."

I point my skewer at her and dissemble creatively. "That stuff is fairly serious juju, in our field. The Pentagon plays with it. We've got it. A couple of other countries have occult operations groups who make use of destiny entanglement fields. But the likes of Yusuf Qaradawi can't get his hands on it without a hell of a lot of reverse engineering, any more than the provisional IRA ever got their hands on cruise missile technology. The difference is, to build a cruise missile takes a ton of aerospace engineers, an advanced electronics industry, and factories. Whereas to build a scalar field that can locally boost probability coefficients attached to a Wigner's Friend observer – say, to allow a suicide bomber to walk right through a ring of bodyguards as if they aren't there – takes a couple of theoreticians and one or two field ops. Occult weapons are so much more *portable* that you can think in terms of stealing the infrastructure – if you've got people who can understand it. As most non-governmental activist groups rely on cannon-fodder so dumb they have 'mom' and 'dad' tattooed on their knuckles so the cops know who they belong to, that isn't usually much of a threat."

"But." She raises her last satay and swallows the skewered morsel. "This time there is." I see motion outside the window: see a familiar face, little more than a pale blur in the darkness, glance inside as it walks past.

"Evidently," I mumble, feeling guilty.

"So your bosses decided to trail me in public and see what they

picked up while trying to identify the group by way of the museum basement," she adds briskly. "How many people are watching us, Bob?"

"At least one right now," I say, heart bouncing around my ribcage. "That I know of, I mean. This is supposed to be a full top-and-tail job, guards outside the hotel and round the clock watch on your movements. Same as politicians at risk of assassination get. Not that we're expecting any suicide bombers," I add hastily.

She smiles at me warmly: "I'm *so* pleased to know that. It really makes me feel secure."

I wince. "Can you suggest any alternatives?" I ask.

"Not from your boss's – what's his name? Angleton? His point of view. No, I don't suppose there is." A waiter appears silently and removes our plates. She looks at me with an expression that I can't read. "Why are *you* here, Bob?"

"Uh…" I pause to get my thoughts in order. "Because it's my mess. I got roped in because I didn't follow procedures and hang you out to dry in California, and then I was there when things turned nasty, and this whole mess is classified up to stupid levels because there's a turf war going on between project management and operational executive—"

"That's not what I meant." She's silent for a moment. Then, "Why did you break the rules in Santa Cruz? Not that I object, but…"

"Because—" I inspect my wineglass, "I like you. I don't think leaving people I like in the shit is a good way to behave. And, frankly, I don't have a very professional attitude to my work. Not the way the spooks think I should."

She leans forward. "Do you have a more professional attitude to your work now?"

I swallow. "No, not really."

Something – a foot – rubs up and down my ankle and I nearly jump out of my skin. "Good." She smiles in a way that turns my stomach to jelly, and the waiter arrives with a precariously balanced pile of dishes before I can say anything and risk embarrassing myself. We just stare at each other until he's gone, and she adds: "I hate it when people let their professionalism get in the way of real life."

We eat, and we talk about people and things, not necessarily in complimentary terms. Mo explains what it's like to be married to a New York lawyer and I commiserate, and she asks me what it's

like to live with a manic-depressive psycho bitch from hell, and evidently she's been talking to Pinky and Brain about things because I find myself describing my relationship with Mhari with sufficient detachment that it might as well be over – ancient history. And she nods and asks if running into Mhari in Accounts and Payroll isn't embarrassing and this leads onto a long discourse on how working for the Laundry is about as embarrassing as things can get: from the paperclip audits to the crazy internal billing system, and about how I hoped that getting into field ops would get me out from under Bridget's thumb, but no such luck. And Mo explains about tenure track backbiting politics in small American university departments, and about why you can kiss your career goodbye if you publish too much – as well as too little – and about the different ways in which a dual-income no-kiddies couple can self-destruct so messily that I'm left thinking maybe Mhari isn't that unusual after all.

We end up walking back to the hotel arm in arm, and under a broken streetlamp she stops, wraps her arms around me, and kisses me for what feels like half an hour. Then she rests her chin on my shoulder, beside my ear. "This is so good," she whispers. "If only we weren't being followed."

I tense. "We're—"

"I don't like being watched," she says, and we let go of each other simultaneously.

"Me neither." I glance round and see a lone guy on the street behind us looking in the window of a closed shop, and all the romance flees the evening like gas from a punctured balloon. "Shit."

"Let's just… go back. Hole up and wait for morning."

"I guess."

We start moving again and she takes my hand. "Great evening out. Try it again some time?"

I smile back at her, feeling both regret and optimism. "Yeah."

"*Without* the audience."

We reach the hotel, share a last drink, and head for our separate rooms.

I dream of wires. Dark landscape, cold mud. Something screams in the distance; lumpy shapes strung up on barbed wire stretched before the fortress. The screams get louder and there's a rumbling and crashing and somewhere in the process I become aware that I'm not

dreaming – someone is screaming, while I lie in bed halfway between sleeping and waking.

I'm on my feet almost before I realise I'm awake. I grab a T-shirt and jeans, somehow slide my feet into both legs simultaneously and I'm out the door within ten seconds. The corridor is silent and dim, the only lighting coming from the overhead emergency strips; it's narrow, too, and by night the pastel-painted walls form a claustrophobic collage of grey-on-black shadows. Silence – then another scream, muffled, coming from upstairs. It's definitely human and it doesn't sound like anything you'd expect to hear from a hotel room at night. I pause for a moment, feeling silly as I consider that particular possibility – then duck back into my room and grab the knife and the palmtop I've left atop the dresser. *Now* I head for the staircase.

Another scream and I take the steps two at a time. A door opens behind me, a tousled head poking out and mumbling, "I'm trying to sleep…"

The hair on my arms stands on end. The stair rail is glowing a faint, eerie blue; sparks sting my bare feet as I climb and the handle of the fire door at the top of the stairs gives me a nasty shock. Air sighs past me, a thin breeze blowing along the corridor where blue flickering outlines the door frames in darkness. Another scream and this time a thudding noise, then a muffled crash: I hear a door slam somewhere below me, then the shattering whine of a fire alarm going off.

Mo is in the Plato Suite. That's where the screams are coming from, where the wind blows – I hit the door with my shoulder, as hard as I can, and bounce.

"What is going on?"

I glance round. A middle-aged woman, thin-faced and worried: "Fire alarm! I heard screaming in here. Can you get help?"

She steps forward, waving a big bunch of keys: she must be the concierge. "Allow me." She turns the door handle and the key and the door slams open inwards as a gust of wind grabs us both and tries to yank us into the room. I grab her arm and brace my feet against the doorframe. Now there's a scream, right in my ear – but she grabs my wrist with another hand, and I wrestle her back into the corridor. A howling gale is blowing through the doorway, as if someone's punched a hole in the universe: I risk a glance round it and see—

A hotel bedroom in chaos and disarray – wardrobe tumbled on the floor, bedclothes strewn everywhere – all the hallmarks of a fight, or a

burglary, or something. But where in my room there's another door and then a cramped bathroom, here there's a *hole*. A hole with lights on the other side of it that cast sharp shadows across the damaged furniture. Stars, harsh and bright against the darkness of a flat, alien landscape shrouded in twilight.

I pull my head back and gasp into the woman's ear: "Get everybody out of here! Tell them it's a fire! I'll get help!" She's half doubled-over from the wind but she nods and stumbles towards the staircase. I turn to follow, shocked, half-dazed. *Where the hell have the watchers gone? We're supposed to be under surveillance, dammit!* I look back towards the bedroom, for a final glance through that opening that shouldn't be there. The wind batters at my back, a gale howling past my ears. The opening is the size of a large pair of doors, ragged bits of lath and wallpaper showing where the small gate ripped through the wall. Beyond it – rolling ground, deep cold; a valley with a still lake beneath the icy, unwinking stars that form no constellations I can recognize. Something dim frosts the sky; at first I think it's a cloud, but then I recognise the swirl – the arms of a giant spiral galaxy raised above a dim landscape not of this world.

I'm freezing, the wind is trying to rip me through the doorway and carry me into the alien landscape – and there's no sign of Mo, nor of her abductor. She's in there somewhere, that's for sure. Whoever, whatever opened it was waiting for her to go to bed when we came back to the hotel. They left fragments of their geometry inscribed in bloody runes on the walls and floor. They'll have planned this, taken her for their own purposes—

A hand grabs my arm. I jerk round, it's Alan, looking just as much like a school teacher as ever, wearing an expression that says the headmaster is angry. His other hand is wrapped around the grips of a very large pistol. He bends close and yells, "Let's get the fuck out of here!"

No argument. He pulls me towards the fire door and we make our way down the stairs, shocked and frostbitten. The wind quietens behind us as we rush down to the ground floor, all the way to the bar where Angleton is waiting to be briefed.

The emergency gathers pace over the next three hours.

When I glance out the front door I see a fire-control truck – a big lorry with a control room mounted on its load bed – squatting in the middle of the street outside the hotel, blue lights strobing against the darkness; a couple of pumps are drawn up on either side, and a gaggle of police vans are parked round the corner. Cops are busy buzzing around, evacuating everyone on the block from hotel and dwelling alike – the cover story is that there's a gas leak. The pump engines are real enough, but the control vehicle has nothing to do with the fire brigade: Angleton had it shipped into Holland before Mo and I arrived, just in case. It belongs to OCULUS – Observation and Coordination Unit Liaison, Unconventional Situations – the NATO occult equivalent of a NEST or Nuclear Emergency Search Team. But while NEST operatives are really only trained to look for terrorist nukes, OCULUS has to be ready for Armageddon in a variety of guises. I only just found out about OCULUS and I really don't know whether or not I want to punch Angleton or just be grateful for his foresight.

There's rack after rack of specialised communication equipment in the back of the truck, and a scarier bunch of paramilitaries than I've ever seen outside of a movie. They're poking around the hotel right now – sending in robots with cameras, installing sensors on the way up the staircase – laying the groundwork for whatever comes next.

Alan leads me into the bar, where Angleton is waiting. Angleton has dark hollows under his eyes; his tie is loose and his collar unbuttoned. He's scribbling notes on a yellow pad in between snapping instructions into a mobile phone that's just about glued to his ear. "Sit down," he gestures as he listens to someone at the other end.

"We ought to pull back to the amber zone," Alan says, "there's structural damage."

"Later." Angleton waves him off and goes back to talking on the phone. "No, there's no need to go to Rung Four yet, but I want the backup wagon on twenty-four by seven alert, and we'll need plumbers crawling over everything. And baggers, but especially plumbers. Tell Bridget to fuck off." He glances at me. "Grab a drink from the bar and get ready to tell me everything." Back to the phone: "I'll expect hourly updates." He puts the phone down and turns to me. "Now. Tell me exactly what happened."

"I don't *know* what happened," I say. "I went to bed. Next thing, I hear screams and wake up—" I clench my fists to stop my hands shaking.

"Fast forward. What did you find in her room?" Angleton leans forward intently.

"How did you know… hell. I got up there, heard whistling like wind. So I tried to break the door down. Then the concierge showed up, unlocked the door and nearly got sucked in. I grabbed her and sent her back down. There's a gate in there, class four at least – it's about two-plus metres in diameter, runs straight through the wall, and it's stable. Furniture was thrown around as if there was a fight, but there's a big wind blowing. On the other side of the gate there's no atmosphere to speak of."

"No atmosphere." Angleton nods and makes a note as two firemen – I think they're firemen – enter the bar and begin setting up something that looks like a rack of industrial scaffolding in the middle of the room. "The source of the wind?"

"I think so. It was bloody cold, which suggests expansion into vacuum." I shiver and glance up; above our heads the whistle of wind through rubble continues unabated. "She wasn't there," I add. "I think they took her."

Angleton's lips quirk. "That is not an unreasonable deduction." His expression hardens. "Describe the other side of the gate."

"Twilight, a shallow valley. I couldn't see the ground clearly; it sloped down to a distant lake, or something that looked like one. The stars were very clear, not twinkling at all, and I could see they weren't familiar. There was a huge galaxy covering, uh, about a third of the sky."

Alan sticks a glass between my fingers: I take an experimental swallow. Orange juice spiked with something stronger. I continue: "No air on the other side. Alien starscape. But there *are* stars, and at least one planet; that means it's pretty damn close to us, it's not one of those universes where the ratio of the strong nuclear force to the electromagnetic force prevents fusion." I shiver. "Whoever they are, they've got her and they've got an open mass-transfer gate. What do we do now?"

Alan silently leaves the room. Angleton looks at me oddly. "That's a very good question. Have you any ideas to contribute?" he asks.

I swallow. "I have one idea. It's the Ahnenerbe, isn't it? That's the connection. The Middle Eastern guy, the one with the luminous eyes

that she described – it's a possession. Something left over from the war, an Ahnenerbe revenant of some kind, possessing the leader of a Mukhabarat strike cell in California. And now they've snatched Mo."

He closes his eyes. "Your email this afternoon. You are *sure* she positively identified the scan you sent me from California? You'd bet your life on it?"

"Pretty sure." I nod. "Was it—"

"We found the same pattern in Rotterdam." He sighs and opens his eyes again. "The very same: my compliments on your search criteria. Was there something similar in her room?"

"I honestly can't say; it was dark, I was trying not to be dragged in by the wind, and the gate had instantiated in the middle of it. I don't think so, but if you can get a photograph from up there I can confirm—"

"In progress."

Alan comes back in; he's wearing a bright orange overall and carrying a bulky box, some kind of sensor gear. "You'll have to move now," he tells Angleton. "The top floor's in danger of collapsing. Hole up in the van and stay out of the way: we need to sweep the block for werewolves."

"Were—"

I must look surprised because Alan barks a brief laugh at me. "Leftovers from the authors of this incursion, old boy: not hairy-palmed wolf-men with a silver allergy. Come on, shift yourself."

"Shift—" I find myself on my feet, Angleton holding my elbow in a vicelike grip.

"Come now, Mr Howard. This is no time to lose your self-control." He steers me out into the street (barefoot, the tarmac under my toes makes me wince) and then up the steps into the OCULUS command vehicle. A guard waves us in, insect-eyed in respirator. "A spare overall for Mr Howard here," Angleton calls, and a minute later I'm loaded down with enough survival gear to equip a small polar expedition from the y-fronts out.

"You're going to send people in to try and close the gate," I predict in the general direction of the back of Angleton's head as he dials a phone number. "I want to go with them."

"Don't be silly, boy. What do you think you can achieve?"

"I can try to rescue her," I say.

There's a burst of static from further up the compartment and one

of the men in black (black turtleneck, black fatigues, black face-paint and MP-10 slung over his chair) turns and calls out: "Message for the captain!" Alan mutters a curse and squeezes past me. I begin pulling on a sock. There are one-way windows along one side of the cabin and out in the road I see some kind of large truck squeezing past us.

"I'm serious," I tell Angleton. "I know what's going on here, or most of it. Or I can guess. Werewolves, he said. Holdovers from the Reich, huh? And the Mukhabarat connection. That gate doesn't go into the dark anthropic zone; it stops short, somewhere where humans can exist. Really *evil* humans, whoever survived from the Ahnenerbe-SS after the war was lost." I begin to wriggle into the bottom half of my survival suit shell. "I've been studying Sheet 45075 from Birkenau, you know. If it's the same one they used over there, I can shut it down safely – without a massive discharge when it arcs to ground."

He's on the phone again. "Very good, any survivors? Two, you say, and three sacrifices? That's excellent. Have you identified—"

I tap him on the shoulder. "Mo told me what she was researching on the Black Chamber contract," I say. "You really don't want them to get their hands on it."

Angleton's head whips round— "One minute, boy." Back to the phone: "Get them to sing. I don't care how you do it; I want to know who they thought they were summoning by dawn." He puts the phone down and glares at me. "Tell me."

"Probability manipulation," I say.

"Close, but not close enough," Angleton says coldly. He stands up, leaving the armless chair swinging – in the confined space of the truck this is not a good idea. "You got some of it right and the rest wrong. And what makes you think I can afford to risk you? This is an OCULUS job now: straight in, find out what's there, plant demolition charges, straight out."

"Demolition charges." I look past his shoulder. The door opens and a familiar face is coming in. Odd, I'd never imagined what Derek the accountant would look like in battle dress. (Worried, mostly.)

"The commander's due in half an hour," Derek says by way of introduction. "What's the goat doing here?"

"Enough." Angleton waves me after him as he heads for the door. I slide my feet into moon boots, follow him without bothering to fasten the straps. I hurry down the steps into a flashing hell of red and blue lights, Dutch police escorting sleepy hotel guests and residents to safety,

firemen gearing up with breathing apparatus in the road. Angleton pulls me aside. "Interrupt if you see Captain Barnes—"

"Who?"

"Alan Barnes," he says impatiently. "Listen." He fixes me with a beady stare. "This is not a game. There's a very good chance that Dr O'Brien is already dead – in case you hadn't noticed, there's no air on the other side of that gate, and unless her abductors wanted her alive they won't have bothered with niceties like a respirator for her. That lack of air is one of the reasons we must close it as fast as possible, the other being to stop the people who opened it making use of it as a stable egress portal."

"You say *people*," I mutter. "Who? The Ahnenerbe-SS?"

"I hope so," he replies grimly. "Anything else would be infinitely worse. At the end of the war, Himmler ordered a number of so-called werewolf units to continue the struggle. We've never been able to track down the Ahnenerbe's final redoubt, but the suspicion that it lies on the other side of a gate goes back a long way – you've read *OGRE REALITY*, you can imagine why the Mukhabarat might want to get in touch with them."

"So the other side of that gate is—" my mind races "—a hold-out from the Third Reich, a colony intended to keep the dark flame burning and exact revenge on the enemies of Nazism in due course... One that's had fifty years to fester and grow on an alien world... But they lost the coordinates for the return journey, didn't they? Something went wrong and they were trapped there until—" I stop and stare at Angleton. "You *hope* that's what's on the other side of the gate?"

He nods. "The alternatives are all much worse."

On further thought I have to admit he's right: a colony of leftover Nazi necromancers and their SS bodyguards are trivially dangerous compared to things like the one that took over Fred the accountant. And *they* are small beer by the standards of the sea of universes, where malignant intelligences wait only for an invitation to surge through a knothole in the platonic realm and infect our minds.

"How are you going to deal with them?" I ask. Angleton leads me round the truck: I can get a good view of the big low-loader that squeezed past us, and there's some sort of tracked vehicle sitting on its load-bed. There's a crane, too. I peer closer, but the cordon of cops around it bars my view. "How the hell are you going to get that through a third-floor window?" I ask.

Angleton shrugs. "I'm sure the hotel owners will claim on their building insurance." He looks at me. "Alan's men are professionals, Robert. They're not used to being slowed down by civilians like you – or me. What can you do that they can't?"

I lick my lips. "Can they open a temporary gate back home – if the door there slams shut behind them? Can they safely disarm a live geometry node?"

"They're the Artists' Rifles," Angleton says witheringly. "They're the bloody SAS, boy, 21st Battalion Territorial Army; what did you think they were, a gun club? Who else do you think we'd trust with a hydrogen bomb wired up to a dead man's handle?"

I stare at the low loader and realise that the cops around it are all carrying HK-4s and facing outwards. "I can provide you with a different kind of insurance policy. Give me the charts and I'll see they make it back alive – with Mo, if I have any say in the matter. Plus, aren't you just a little *curious* about what the Ahnenerbe might have been doing with a Z-2 and its descendants for the past fifty years?"

"Do you want me to strangle him now, or wait till he's finished annoying you?" asks Alan, who has sneaked up behind me so quietly I never even noticed. Needless to say I almost jump out of my skin.

"Leave him be." Angleton almost looks amused. "He's still young enough to think he's immortal – and he's cleared for active. All waivers signed, next of kin on file, carries an organ donor card, that sort of thing. Can you use him?"

I have to turn my head to keep both of them in view: Angleton, the old, dried-up ghost of intelligence spooks past, and Alan – Captain Barnes, that is – schoolmasterly and intense. "That depends," Alan tells Angleton. Then he focuses on me. "Bob: you can come along on this trip on one condition. The condition is that if you get any of my men killed by arsing around, I will personally shoot you. Do you understand and agree?"

Somehow I manage to nod, although my mouth's gone very dry all of a sudden: "Yup, got it. No arsing around."

"Well, that's all right then!" He claps his hands together briskly, then softens very slightly. "As long as you do what you're told, you'll pass. I'm going to give you to Blevins and Pike; they'll look after you. I know what your specialities are: weird alien runes, ancient Nazi computers, esoteric rocket science, that sort of thing. Boffin city. If we run into

anything like that I'll let you know. What's your weapons clearance, if any?"

"I'm certified to level two, unconventional." I frown. "What else do you need?"

"Ever used scuba gear?"

"Er, yes." I neglect to add that it was on a holiday package deal, an afternoon of training followed by supervised swimming near a coral reef, with instructors and guides on hand.

"Okay, then I'll leave Pike to check you out on the vacuum gear. You'll be issued with a weapon: you are not, repeat not, to use it under any circumstances while any soldiers are left alive unless you are explicitly ordered to. Got that?"

"Find Pike. Learn how to use vacuum gear. Do not use weapon without orders."

"That'll do." Alan glances at Angleton. "He'll make a good Norwegian Blue, don't you think?"

Angleton raises an eyebrow. "Bet you he'll be 'pining for the fjords' within hours."

"Hah! Hah!" Alan doesn't bray: his laughter is oddly fractured, as if it's escaping from a broken muffler. Loss of control, that's what it is. He's thin, wiry, intense, and looks like the kind of schoolmaster who's spent years slitting throats in strange countries, and took to teaching as a way of passing on his knowledge. A weird breed, not uncommon in the British public schools, who recycle their own graduate cannon-fodder to train the next generation in an ethos of military service. And whose mannerisms are aped lower down the academic ladder. Artists' Rifles indeed!

I try telling myself that Mo will be alright, that they wouldn't have bothered abducting her if they didn't want her alive, but it's no good: whenever I get some idle time my brain keeps looping on the fact that someone I feel strongly about has been snatched and may already be dead. Luckily I don't have much time to obsess because Alan immediately drags me back inside the OCULUS control truck and throws me to Sergeant Martin Pike: who takes one look at me, mutters something about the blessings of Loki, and starts grilling me about nitrogen narcosis, the bends, partial pressure of oxygen, and all sorts of other annoying things I haven't studied since school. Pike is a sergeant. He's also a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering and designs things that go fast

and explode when he isn't being a weekend soldier in a special unit hung off the SAS. He's met people like me before and knows how to deal with them.

A second – and then a third – fire-control truck has drawn up outside the evacuated hotel and we're in the back of vehicle number two, which seems to be a mobile armoury. I'm stripping off the survival gear and struggling into something like a bastard cross between a body stocking and a piece of bondage rubberwear from hell – low pressure survival gear, Pike tells me, a lycra and silk contraption that seems to consist mostly of straps and is designed to do the same job as a space suit in terms of holding me together and helping me breathe.

"Vacuum isn't as hostile as you probably imagine if you've read too much bad science fiction," he says while I'm grunting and wheezing over the upper half of the suit. "But you'd have real fun breathing without a decent gas seal around your regulator, and without this suit and pressurized goggles you'll end up half-blind and covered in blood blisters within ten or twenty minutes. The real problems are heat dissipation – there's no air around you, to keep you cool by convection, insulation from the ground – which is going to be *fucking* cold, and keeping breathing. Cooling we can deal with – this cloth is porous, you start sweating and the sweat will evaporate and keep you cool, and there's a drinking bottle in your helmet. Don't let it run dry, because running one of these suits is a bit like running a noddy suit in the Iraqi desert – you will sweat like hell, you will drink a pint of water and electrolyte every hour, and if you forget to do that you will keel over from heat stroke. Turn round, now." I turn round and he starts tightening straps all the way up my back as if I'm wearing a corset. "These are to keep your rib cage under a bit of elastic tension, help you breathe out."

"What if I need to take a piss?" I ask.

He chuckles. "Go ahead. There's enough adsorbent padding that you probably won't freeze your wedding tackle off."

Trussed up in the pressure suit, I feel like a fifties comic-book hero who's blundered through a fetish movie's wardrobe. Pike passes me a bunch of elbow and knee protectors, a tough overall, and a pair of massively padded moon boots. Somehow I struggle into them. Then he comes up with a lightweight backpack frame with air tanks and—

"A re-breather? Isn't that dangerous?" I ask.

"Yup. We aren't NASA and we can't waste five hours depressurising

you down to run on pure oxygen. 'Sides, you're not wearing a hard-shell suit. You're going to breathe a seventy/thirty nitrogen oxygen mix; we scrub the carbon dioxide out with these lithium hydroxide canisters and recycle the nitrogen, adding oxygen to order."

"Uh-huh. How do I change tanks?"

"On your own? You don't – there's a trick to it and we don't have time to teach you. You cut over from tank one to tank two with the regulator valve here, then you ask me to change tanks for you. If someone wants you to change their tank, which they won't unless things go pear-shaped in a big way, you do it like this—" he demonstrates on an unmounted backpack and I try to keep track of it. Then he shows me the helmet and the chest-mounted monitors that keep track of my gas supply, temperature, and so on. Finally he seems satisfied. "Well, if you remember all that you're not going to die by accident – at least not immediately. Still happy?"

"Um." I think about it. "It'll have to do. What about radio?"

"Don't worry about that – it's automatic." He flicks a switch or two on my chest panel, evidently making sure. "You're on the general channel – everyone will be able to hear you unless they explicitly shut you out. Now..." He picks up a gadget that looks like a pair of underwater digital video cameras strapped with gaffer tape to either side of a black box gizmo of some kind. "Have you ever seen one of these before?"

I peer closely, then unclip the lid on the box and look inside. "I didn't know they'd successfully weaponised that."

He looks surprised. "Can you tell me what it is and how it works?"

"Can I – yeah, I've seen this arrangement before, but only in the lab. This chip *here* is a small, custom-built ASIC processor that emulates a neural network that was first identified in the *cingulate gyrus* of a medusa. Turns out you can find the same pathways in a basilisk, but... well. There's a load of image processing stuff on the front end, behind those video cameras. Now, I would guess that the two cameras are the optical component of this gadget: we're performing some sort of wave superposition on the target, so—"

"Fine, fine." He passes me a somewhat shopsoiled video camera manual. "Give this a read. And this." He hands me a bundle of typed pages with bright red *SECRET* headers, then passes me the lash-up. I look it over dubiously: there's an arrow on top of the neural network box with the caption THIS SIDE TOWARDS ENEMY, and a flat-

panel camcorder viewfinder on the back so you can pretend it's just a computer game you're playing with while you kill people.

What this gadget does violates the second law of thermodynamics: nobody's quite sure why it's so specific, but the medusa effect seems to be some kind of observationally mediated quantum tunnelling process. It turns out that something like point zero one percent of all the atomic nuclei of carbon in the target zone acquire eight extra protons and a balancing number of neutrons, turning 'em into highly electronegative silicon ions. A roughly balancing proportion of carbon nuclei just seem to vanish, wrecking whatever bonds they were part of.

"How much damage can this thing do to a person?" I ask.

"How much damage will a sawn-off shotgun do?" Pike responds. "Enough. Silicon-hydrogen bonds aren't stable. Don't point it at anyone and don't switch it on and most of all don't hit the OBSERVE button unless I tell you to. Which I won't, unless you are very, very unlucky. Or unless you decide to blow your feet off by accident, which is your own lookout."

"Mmf. Understood." I switch off the viewfinder and power down both cameras then gingerly put the gadget down. "You aren't expecting trouble by any chance?"

Pike stares at me. "No, it's my job to see that you don't get into trouble," he says. I take a second to recognise the expression: he's wondering if I'm going to be a liability.

"Tell me what to do and I'll do it," I say. "You're the expert on this."

"Am I?" He looks sceptical. "You're the occult specialist, you tell me what we're up against." He bends down, picks up a re-breather regulator, begins stripping off the insulation panels in an absent-minded sort of way. "I mean it. What are you expecting to find on the other side of this gate?"

Something clicks in my mind: "You've gone through gates before, right?"

He glances at me. "Maybe. Maybe not." I realise that he isn't looking at the re-breather as he strips it: he's got it down to a set of motions he can run through in total darkness. Then it hits me: I haven't. I'm going to be hopelessly dependent on these guys for just about everything more challenging than breathing. Liability, me? Maybe I don't know what I'm getting myself into after all. But it's a bit late to back out now.

"Well." I lick my suddenly dry lips. "This one, we *hope* the only things waiting for us are a bunch of superannuated Nazis who've

kidnapped one of our scientists. Trouble is, this bunch sent someone through to California, and London, and maybe to Rotterdam, who isn't too superannuated to be banging heads. So I'll take a rain-check on the predictions, if you don't mind – expect the worst and hope you're disappointed."

"Indeed." His tone is dry as he adds, "I love these bastard colostomy-fucking reconnaissance jobs, I really do."

They force me to catch a couple or three hours sleep by sticking a needle full of phenobarbitone into my left arm and making me count backwards from ten. I never make it past five; then there's a pain in my other arm and Pike is shaking my shoulder. "Wake up," he says. "Briefing in five minutes, action in half an hour."

"Euurgh," I say, or something equally coherent: he passes me a mug of something that might be mislabelled as coffee and I sit up and try to drink it while he disposes of the used antidote syrette. I have a vague memory of dreams: eyes with luminous worms swimming in them, eyes like a friendly death staring at me across an electrodynamic summoning trap. I shudder as a little rat-faced guy sits down opposite me and opens up a zippered and incongruously expensive-looking golf bag.

Pike takes it upon himself to introduce us. "Bob, this is Lance-Corporal Blevins. Roland, this is Bob Howard, a Laundry necromancer."

Rat-face looks at me and grins, baring unfeasibly large and yellow incisors. "Pleased ter meet yer," he says, pulling an iron out of his golf bag – one with telescopic sights and thick foam insulation over most of the visible surfaces. Vacuum-adapted, I realise: these guys have been exploring gates before. "Allus nice ter 'ave a bit of animal with us."

"Animal?"

"Magic," Pike explains. "Listen, you stay close to me or Roland unless I tell you otherwise. He's the squadron backup: what this means is, he'll either be in the rear or deployed to cover a quick in-and-out. He'll park you somewhere safe and keep an eyeball on you if I'm too busy to nursemaid."

"Diamond geezer, mate," Blevins says, winking horribly: then he pulls out a bunch of jeweller's screwdrivers and goes to work on his gun, fiddling with the sights.

What I think is, *you guys really know how to make someone feel wanted*,

but what I end up saying is "Uh," because, once I get my ego out of the way, Pike is right. I am not a soldier, I know nothing about what to do and what not to do, and I'm not even in good physical condition: fundamentally, I guess I am a liability to these guys, except for my specialist expertise. It's not a very pleasant thought, but they're not going out of their way to rub it in, so the least I can do is be polite. And hope Mo is alright.

"Wot you fink I should load up on?" Roland asks. "I got silver bullets in seven point six two, but they tend to tumble in low pressure regimes like wot's on the other side of this gate —"

"Briefing first," Pike says. "Let's go."

The hotel bar is barely recognisable. Scaffolding and jacks in every corner support a protective raft just under the ceiling: there's a nest of wiring and monitors on the bar top, and some sort of stair-climbing robot camera waiting just inside the doorway. Alan – Captain Barnes – is waiting next to a woman who's sort of slumped all over the robot's control panel, muttering to it and twiddling a circuit tester in a meaningful way. A dozen other men in pressure suits and camouflage overalls are leaning against the walls or sitting down: half of them have backpacks and full face-covering helmets to hand, but there's a surprising shortage of guns and I'm the only one in the room without a notepad – until I pull out my palmtop, which I've been carrying in a pocket more or less continuously since I was ejected from my bedroom.

There's not much idle chatter: the mood in the room is pretty sombre, and Alan gets down to business at once, like a headmaster conducting a staff meeting. "The situation we're facing is an open gate, class four, with unknown – but undesirable – parties on the other side. They've snatched one of our scientists. A secondary mission goal is to get her back alive, but the primary goal is to identify the parties responsible and, if they are who we think they are, neutralise them and then withdraw, ensuring the gate closes behind us. Let me stress that we are not one hundred percent certain who we're up against, so identification and threat characterisation are our first tasks. This isn't as clear-cut a job as we'd like, so I want you all to focus on it and give it a bit of thought. First, the situation. Derek?"

Derek from the Laundry, Derek the dried-up old accountancy clerk, stands up and delivers a terse, comprehensive sitrep as if he's done it a thousand times before. Who'd have thought it? "Ahnenerbe werewolf

colony left over from Himmler's last stand." Mumble. "Mukhabarat." Cough. "Republican guard." Mutter. "Kidnapped scientist." Mumble. I don't need to take notes; near as I can tell I've heard it all before. Glancing round I try to catch Angleton's eye – just in time to see him slipping out the back. Then Derek finishes. "Back to you, Captain."

"Our mission is to take a look on the other side of the hill," says Alan. "Bringing back kidnapped scientists and neutralising undesirables are tactical tasks, but our number one strategic priority is to do a full threat evaluation and ensure word gets back home. So, step one is to send through a crawler and make sure there isn't a welcome party waiting for us on the other side. If it's clear, we insert. Step two—" he pauses "—we secure the other side, emplace the demolition package in case things go to pieces on us, then improvise depending on what we find." He grins, briefly. "I love surprises. Don't you?"

Well, yes: otherwise I'd never have volunteered for active duty in the first place. Which is why, half an hour later, I find myself standing on a purple-painted hotel staircase under a portrait of Martin Heidegger, breathing through an oxygen mask and waiting to follow a dumpy little tracked robot, half a platoon of territorial SAS, and an armed hydrogen bomb through a rip in the space-time continuum.

Blurred shadows dance across the video screen, grey and black textures like ripped velvet laid over volcanic ash. On the floor in front of my feet the coil of cable unspools, snaking into darkness. Hutter, the equipment tech with the control panel, is hunched over it like a video game addict, twitching her joystick with gloved hands. I lean over behind Alan, who has the ringside view: I have to lean because the backpack is a solid mass, thirty kilograms pushing me forward if I even think about relaxing.

"One metre forward: now pan left."

The screen jerks. There's a thin wail as air vents through the doorframe and the cable reels out: then the scenery on screen begins to rotate. We see more blurred grey rubble, then a view that swoops away, down to a distant sea. As the camera pans round further the back of the robot comes into view, trailing a white umbilical back into the incongruous side of a wall. There isn't enough light to examine the wall, or enough scan lines: it's a night-vision camera, but we're operating in starlight. The camera continues to rotate until it's pointing back to its original bearing. There is no sign of life.

"Looks clear," someone whispers in my ear, voice tinny and half-masked by static.

"If you want to go first, feel free to volunteer," Alan says dryly. "Mary. See any hot-spots?"

"Nothing," the tech reports.

"Okay. Bearing zero six zero, forward ten or until you see anything, then halt and report."

She follows through and the little robot lurches forward into the grey and black landscape on the other side of the gate. "Ambient air pressure, ten pascals. Ambient temperature – thermocouple gives an error, FLIR is flat-lined, but that backup sensor is claiming somewhere between forty-five and sixty kelvin. Gravimetric – it's earthlike. Uh, I'm worried about the power, boss. Battery load is normal, but we're losing power like crazy – I think it's in danger of freezing solid. We never designed a robot to do this kind of environment – it's colder than summer on Pluto."

Someone whistles tunelessly until Pike tells him to shut up.

"How does this affect our environment model?" Alan asks aloud. "The suits are only certified down to a hundred and twenty kelvin."

Someone else clears his throat. "Donaldson here. I think we should be okay, sir. We're only going to be in contact with the ground via the feet, and we've got plenty of insulation – and heating – there. No air means no convective loss, and we're not going to radiate any faster just because ambient is cooler. Our regulators use a counter-current loop to warm incoming air from whatever we breathe out, so they're not in danger of icing up. The real risk is that we're going to be more visible on infrared, and if we get into a firefight and have to take cover we are going to get frostbitten so fast it isn't funny. That lake is probably liquid nitrogen – don't walk on any shiny blue ice, it'll be frozen oxygen and the heat from your feet will flash-boil it. Oh, and it's diamagnetic: your compasses won't work."

"Thank you for that reminder, Jimmy," says Alan. "Any more compelling insights into why the laws of physics are not our friends?"

The camera pans round: same landscape, but now we see the gate framed by a low mound of dirt heaped up on one side, and a broken-down wall on the other. The lake is clearer, and some sort of rectilinear structure is just visible over the crest of the ridge.

"I don't understand the temperature," Donaldson says pensively. "There's something about it I can't quite put my finger on."

"Well, you're going to get a chance to put your finger on it quite soon. Mary, still no hot spots? Good. Alpha team, ready, insert."

On the other side of the doorway three guys wearing dark, insulated suits and backpacks quickly duck through the open gate and are gone from our universe. The robot's camera, pointing backwards, catches them for posterity: ghosts leaping over it and passing out of view to either side.

"Chaitin: clear, over."

"Smith: nothing in view. Over."

"Hammer: clear, over."

The camera pans round and takes in three shapes hunched low behind the bluff, one of them pointing a stubby pipe back past the robot.

"Don, if you'd be so good as to take a look round the rear of the gate. Mike, Bravo team insert."

Three anonymous bulky figures push past behind me, through the pressure doors erected in front of the hotel room: a gust of wind howls past my helmet as they enter the gate. The camera pans—

"Chaitin: nothing behind the gate. Landscape is clear, rising to hills in the middle distance. I see some kind of geometric inscription on the ground and one, no, two bodies. Male, naked, gutted with a sharp implement. They look to be frozen – handcuffed behind their backs."

My heart flops over and I begin to breathe again, ashamed but relieved that neither of them is Mo. "Howard here: that'll be the human sacrifices they used to open the gate," I say. "Is there a kind of metal tripod nearby, with an upturned dish on top?"

"Chaitin: nope, somebody's cleaned up around here."

"Bloody typical," somebody mutters out of turn.

"Charlie, insert," Andy says. He taps me on the arm: "C'mon, Bob. Time to party."

Ahead of us, Pike picks up the controls on something that looks like an electric street cleaner – the kind of wheeled cart you walk behind – and drives it forward towards the doors. It nudges through and the gale almost sucks me forward; I follow in his wake, trying not to think about the cart's payload. You can make a critical mass out of about six kilos of plutonium, but you need various other bits and pieces to make a bomb; while they've been fitted inside an eight-inch artillery shell before now, nobody has yet built a nuke that you can carry easily – especially when you're wearing a thirty-kilo life-support backpack.

Mist spurts out around me as I walk through the gate, and suddenly

the ground under my feet isn't carpet any more: it's crumbly, crunchy, like a hard frosted snowfall over gravel. I hear a faint buzz as heat exchangers switch on in my helmet, using the warmth of my breath to heat the air I'm breathing in. My skin prickles, abruptly feeling tight, my suit seems to contract all around me, and I emit an enormous and embarrassing fart. External air pressure: zero. Temperature: low enough to freeze oxygen. Jesus, it *is* springtime on Pluto.

Pike drives his gadget forward about five metres, halfway to the parked robot, then stops and begins unreeling a spool of cable from on top of it. He almost backs into me before I get out of his way. "Bob, take this." He hands me some kind of joystick-like gadget with a trigger built into it, plugged into the wire.

"What is it?" I ask, thumbing my intercom to his channel.

"Dead man's handle. We use two of them to detonate while we're out of range of the permissive action link signal – this side of the gate. Go on, pull the trigger: I've got the other one. It's perfectly safe to let go of one trigger at a time, it only goes bang if both triggers are released for ten seconds at the same time."

"Gee, thanks. How long did you say this wire is?"

I lumber in a circle, taking care not to let the wire get twisted around my feet as I take in the view. The gate is inscribed in a low wall; our footsteps have obscured the transient map in front of it, but behind the wall that supports the aperture the pattern is more or less intact (along with the two victims who were sacrificed to open it). The ground is crunchy, like loose soil after a heavy frost. Behind us and to left and right it slopes up towards a low ridge; in front, the ground slopes down and broadens out into a valley. The stars overhead are unwinking, dimensionless points of light in a harsh vacuum. They look reddish, demonic eyes staring down at me; a universe of red dwarves, long after the sun has burned down.

Alpha and Bravo teams have fanned out ahead and behind the wall, advancing in a curious duck-walking crouch from cover to cover. I spot a lump sticking out of the ground about five metres away, and plod over to inspect it. It's a treestump, shattered half a metre above the ground and hard as ice. I reach out to touch it and a thin mist bursts from the wood – I yank my fingers back before the stream of gas can chill them into frostbite. Wood crumbles and falls away from the stump, shattered by the warmth. I shudder inside my layers of compression fabric and insulation, and fart again.

There are boot imprints in the ground behind the gate, and they don't look like ours.

"Howard, get back to the gate. Don't tangle up the wire you're holding."

"Understood." I stomp back towards the gate, collecting loops of wire from the handle (which I have carefully avoided arming).

"Give." An anonymous, bulky figure holds out a hand: above the visor I see the name BLEVINS. I pass Roland the trigger and he attaches it to his chest with a Velcro pad, then heads for the low rise behind the gate.

"Howard, Barnes here. I'm on the rise behind you, twenty metres upslope. Come tell me what you think of this." A click as he hops frequency, to check on everybody else in turn.

I come up beside him on the rise and find him hefting a heavily insulated camera in front of his faceplate. Someone – Sergeant Howe, I think – is crouching further up the slope with some kind of shotgun or grenade-launcher in his arms. "Come on and look at this," Alan says; he sounds mildly amused as he waves me forward. "Keep your head low and no sudden movements. That's far enough, Bob."

I can just peep over the ridge, which falls away abruptly in front of me. More dead treestumps; the ground beneath me, the crunching – now I can see that it's grass, freeze-dried and mummified under a layer of carbon dioxide frost. Hills or low mounds of some kind rise in the near distance, and then—

"Disneyland?" I hear myself saying.

Alan laughs quietly. "Not Disneyland. Think Mad King Ludwig's last commission, as executed by Buckminster Fuller." Cheesecake crenellations, battlements with machicolations, moat and drawbridge and turrets. Spiky pointed roofs on the towers – like the police stations in West Belfast, designed to deflect incoming mortar fire. Arrow slots filled with mirror glass half a metre thick. Radomes and antenna masts in the courtyard where you'd expect armoured knights to mount up.

"I didn't know the RUC were Cthulhu-worshippers."

"They're not, laddie," says Howe, and I flush. "Check out the slope up to that moat. Probably got rammed earth behind those walls, but they're not really expecting direct artillery fire. Intruders on foot, rockets, I don't know what – but not tanks or direct fire."

"They won," Alan says distantly. "This isn't a fortification. Bob, I

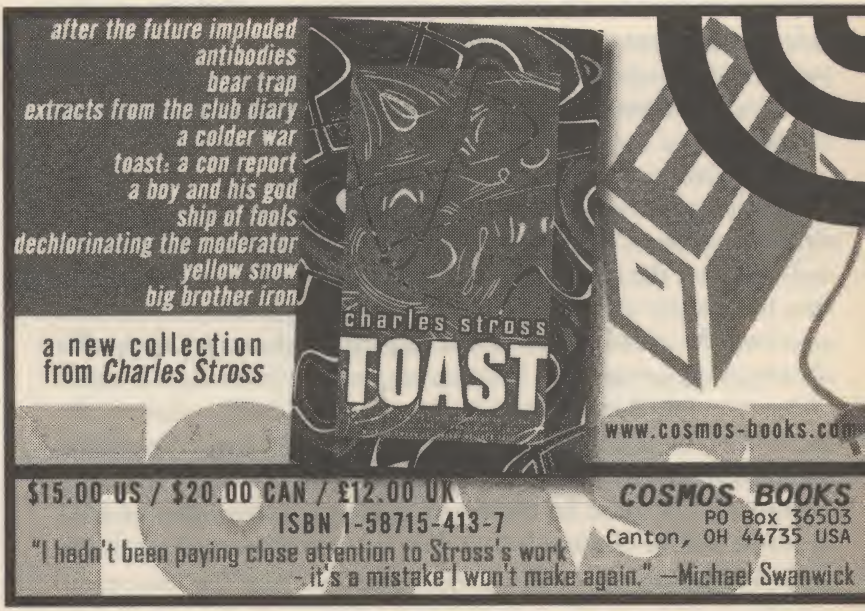
should apologise: it *is* a police station." Light glistens on the Gestapo battlements as I try to understand what he means.

"What happened to them?" I ask.

"Look," says Howe, pointing off to the left. I follow his direction and get my first inkling of just how far beyond our experience this world is. From up here the moon is visible, gibbous and close to the horizon; but the familiar man-in-the-moon pattern of marias and seas has been erased, replaced by a shadow-scribed visage carved across the entire lunar surface in runes ten kilometres deep. It's astonishing to behold, a miracle testimonial to one man's vanity on a scale that makes Mount Rushmore or the pyramids look like a child's sandcastle. And from the small tuft of moustache to the keynote cowlick of hair, the face is instantly recognisable.

From a quarter of a million miles away, Hitler's image stares at me across a land given over to ice and shadow. And I know the Ahnenerbe can't be far away. ●

(To be concluded.)



This is Josh Lacey's second SF story so far (his first, THE PILGRIM, appeared here last issue). His plays have been performed in Britain, Canada and the USA, and films have been made from two of his screenplays: RADIO (1997) and THE BIOGRAPHER (2000). A libretto, MIASMA, has been performed, broadcast, and issued on CD. He has just finished writing his first novel.

A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES

JOSH LACEY

The movies had no gravedigger. They died, and their corpses were left lying wherever they fell. Tapes, discs, spools, reels, photographs and scripts: some were burnt or recycled, but most were discarded and forgotten. If you walk through the old cities, apparently, you can still see the traces. Under the neon signs and flashing lights, antique lettering lurks. The Empire. The Odeon. The Picture Palace. For almost two centuries, crowds would have gathered inside to watch the movies: an audience of five or six hundred people cocooned in darkness, staring at flickering images on a huge screen; slumped in squashy seats, chewing popcorn, slurping sugary drinks through plastic straws. Sometimes as many as a thousand. A thousand men and women in one room! Imagine that.

My cinema is not so big. In fact, it hardly counts as a cinema, more like a screening-room, a place to show movies rather than a palace of cinematic pleasure. It holds two hundred, but their chairs are stackable and rigid, not the cushioned, sumptuous, red velvet seats that I have seen in so many old photographs. For a modern audience, stackable seats have the added attraction that they can be placed at a reasonable distance from one another. I don't want people to feel uncomfortable, always worrying that their elbows or knees might touch someone who isn't a close friend or relative. Not that there's anything to be worried about. The cinema is rigorously air-conditioned and constantly monitored. The guest list consists of people we know well, and their identities will be checked before they are even allowed through our first set of gates.

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At night, when the lights are dimmed and the audience settled in their chairs, I hope that the cinema's flaws will become almost invisible. Yes, if a gust of wind sneaks up the valley and scuds over our property, the walls of the tent will billow. Rain would rattle on the roof. Any heavier weather would force a cancellation, but I doubt we'll see gales in the first week of May. During the show, the interior will be dark, and I hope everyone's attention will be focused on the screen. People will be prepared for the poor quality of the picture, but they may be surprised, even disappointed, by the crackly sound. The projectionist will have to stand at the back, since it proved impossible to build a separate room for him and his equipment, and the audience will hear his – my – efforts as he changes the reels. However, I doubt that any of our guests has ever entered a cinema, and probably don't even know what one looks like, so this will do.

The first refusal arrived only a couple of hours after I'd sent out the invitations. It was a note from Freddie Morrison, a near neighbour, who lives on the other side of the valley. We speak almost daily. There always seems to be something that requires our attention: a burst pipe, an escaped goat, a rumour of travellers in the vicinity. I read his note several times, seeking its hidden significance, before deciding that it had none. *Dear Nick and Judith*, he had written, *thanks for the invite. I'm sorry, but we won't be able to make it, because the kids have just had their inoculations and we don't want to take the risk of exposing them to any nasties. Have a great time. Let me know how it goes. Freddie.*

When I showed the note to Jude, she smiled in that way of hers. I said, "What are you smiling about?"

"Nothing."

"Come on."

"Well, I did tell you, didn't I?"

"What do you mean?"

"I told you this would happen."

"His kids have just had their inoculations. Of course he can't come."

"And if they hadn't, he'd have found another excuse."

"Why are you always so negative?"

"I'm not negative, I'm realistic."

"Let's not have that argument again."

"Which argument?"

I ignored that. Jude knew as well as I that there were some arguments

we seemed incapable of escaping, each of us retreating to our rhetorical corners and hurling the same tired points at one another. "Freddie and Sarah have been here a hundred times," I said.

"They've never been here with anyone but us."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"What about Tim's birthday? Weren't the Glaisters here too?"

"Maybe," she said, incapable of conceding that she had lost an argument. "Anyway, we'll see what happens."

I've always been interested in the movies, and my interest has grown from a hobby to an obsession. Everyone needs something to occupy the evenings and weekends, and maybe my collection is really just that. Jude doesn't think so. She complains that I have a neurotic attachment to the past. "Think of the dust," she says, whenever I acquire a new object for my collection. She peers over my shoulder, her face crinkled with disapproval, watching me unwrap the sealed package to reveal a publicity shot of some forgotten actress. "You don't know where it's been. Think of all the people who've touched that. Ugh!"

I don't know what she's complaining about. She knows that every artefact had been rigorously cleaned before even entering our home. The kids are more likely to catch germs standing in the breeze than pick up a disease from one of my old photographs.

I've tried to get them interested, but they don't understand what drives me into the past. They may when they're older. Susie sometimes sneaks into my study and stands in the doorway, watching me, waiting until a glimpse of her registers in the corner of my eye and I jump, startled to find myself observed. She laughs, and scarpers, ignoring my calls to come and look at the reel of film that I am cleaning, frame by frame.

Over the years, I've become a bit of an expert. I have shelves stacked with antiques, and a huge catalogue of images, still and moving, which record the progress of an artform from birth to decay. Correspondents contact me all the time, offering or requesting information. Most of my strongest friendships have been built this way. We only meet virtually. Some of us hide behind coy pseudonyms: almost every day, I receive cryptic messages from a Brazilian woman – or man, perhaps – who calls herself Myrna Loy. There are so many John Waynes, they have to distinguish themselves with numbers.

What draws us together? What brings so many people on and off the planet to devote their leisure time to the movies? I don't know. We don't discuss our motives, preferring to swap gossip about actors' lives or make lists of the Ten Best Westerns. I'm not even sure what prompted my own obsession. I've always been interested in history. Even as a child, the twentieth century fascinated me. Huge populations roamed the planet, driven from their homes by famine or conflict. The movies were their artform. Cinema began just before the century, and effectively ended at the beginning of the twenty-first, surviving for a few decades as an entertainment for elite audiences, just as theatre had done after the invention of movies.

The peak of cinematic achievement coincided with the middle of the century. The world was engaged in a massive war, and, like any artform, cinema flourished under the constraints of military conflict. (Just think of our arts at the present moment, bland and pointless, expressing nothing so much as the boredom of their creators. Art needs conflict. In the time of greatest conflict, you will find the greatest art.) I have a huge collection of movies from the 1930s and 1940s. From these, there was never any doubt in my mind as to which movie to show in my cinema. It's a movie that most people know, even if they've never seen it, because it has bequeathed phrases to our language. 'Play it again, Sam.' You've heard that, haven't you? And do you know the strangest fact about that catchphrase? Well, you will, if you ever see the movie.

The refusals came thick and fast. People weren't apologetic, as if they thought that I would have expected them to refuse, or I had offended them in some way with my invitation. Was I surprised? Yes, although I shouldn't have been. I realised that if anyone had invited us to a party for two hundred people, we would probably have found some sensible reason not to go.

I hid this information from Jude, not wanting to bear the brunt of her glee, but she guessed, and compounded my discomfort by demanding to see the list of acceptances, saying that she couldn't decide what to wear unless she knew exactly who was coming. I handed her the paper on which I had printed the names of those who had accepted. Well, the name.

"Oh Christ," said Jude, "I don't believe it. Just us and Richard? This is going to be the most miserable night of our lives."

"What's wrong with Richard?"

"Nothing. Except he always puts you in a bad mood."

"He doesn't. I love seeing Richard."

"So do I. Of course I do. But he's difficult. He's always critical of us."

"There's nothing wrong with that. He keeps us on our toes. Stops us becoming boring country bumpkins."

"I don't think even Richard could do that."

About five years ago, I became determined to create a serious collection of memorabilia from the movie era. I spent every evening at my monitor, scrolling through catalogues, buying the hardware (televisions, projectors, a super-8 camera) and the software (videotapes, DVDs, reels of film) and the junk that surrounds it (photographs, magazines, screenplays, the detritus of an industry which once covered the entire globe). My eyes were bloodshot. Jude told me that I should have chosen a hobby which took me away from my monitor, rather than one which puts me in front of another screen, more flickering images. "Buy a horse," she said. "Learn to ride."

"We don't have enough land."

"Yes, we do."

"And I'm allergic to horses. You remember that time we rode with the kids? I sneezed for three days."

"Okay. Buy some goats."

"Goats? Do you know the problems Freddie has with his goats? He got them as a hobby, and now he spends more time on them than he does on his accountancy."

"At least they'd be useful for something."

"For what, exactly?"

"You could make cheese."

"We're starving now, are we?"

"You should just try and get outside sometimes," she said. "It's not healthy. Without the kids, you'd never leave your study."

I don't know if I was being mischievous or seeking some support for my obsession, but this conversation spurred me to get the kids interested in movies. I rigged up a big white screen, and showed some cartoons from the 1950s. Susie was amused, but Tim put on his headset after five minutes and started playing games. I ordered him to remove it, changed the reels, and showed a war movie, hoping that he might

be gripped by the explosions and destruction. As we watched the battle – little aeroplanes screamed over the sea and pounced on a sleepy port, dropping bombs onto boats, raking their decks with gunfire – I explained some of the history to bring the story to life. "The Americans were totally unprepared," I said. "It was a quiet morning. On the ships, the crews were relaxed, enjoying the sunshine."

Tim sighed, and said, "I know this story."

"Do you? How?"

"We did it in school. I was a pilot. I got shot down."

"If you know the story already, isn't it interesting to see it from another perspective?"

He shook his head and sullenly stared at me until I said, "Go on, then. Play your game."

"Thanks, Dad." He pulled on the headset and wandered off, flexing his arms as he got back into the action. If Tim doesn't want to do something, there's no point trying to force him. Susie stayed for a bit longer, just to avoid hurting my feelings. I changed the reel again, and we sat there for a few minutes, staring at the screen: a man walks along a pavement, showing no surprise at the vast numbers of people who surround him.

Susie wrinkled her nose as she stared at the screen. "Where are they?"

"In a street. In the city. That's New York."

"Why isn't he wearing a mask?"

"In the old days, they didn't wear masks."

"That's stupid."

We let her watch the news, so she's seen pictures of the cities, and she knows how the poor live. Some of our neighbours are shocked that we let our children see images which might disturb them, but Jude and I are confident that we're doing the right thing. There's no point hiding the harsh realities of life from a child.

"Things were different then," I explained. "People didn't really understand about hygiene. They all lived together."

Susie considered what I had said, then asked, "It's better now, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course."

"I thought so," she said, and cuddled up against me. We watched the screen together. The man walks up some steps and through a doorway. It's a hotel. He goes up in a lift, then visits a woman in her room. They kiss. Susie burst out laughing, and ran away to find Tim.

The couple were arguing. She pulled out a gun. He wrenched it from her grasp. She ran out of the room and fled down the corridor, pushing past a waiter, knocking over his trolley. Food and drink crashed on the floor. A few moments later, the woman was sitting at the back of a bus, travelling through the crowded streets.

Our lives are safer. We live longer. We're happier. But I couldn't help feeling a twinge of nostalgia for the ways that people lived in the movies: brushing past strangers in the street, talking to several different people every day, travelling from city to city, never knowing where you would be a month from now. A life like that would be frightening and brutal and short, but full of excitement.

When I tried to express this to Jude, she said, "You could live like that if you want."

"How?"

"Easily. That's how the poor live, isn't it?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Go and live with them if you're so desperate to die young."

"I don't want to die young. I'm just interested in what it would feel like to live in a different way."

"You know exactly what it would feel like," she said. "You'd catch a disease with your first breath, and die within a week."

"The poor live longer than a week."

"Oh, come on," she said. "You know they have immunities."

On Sunday night – two days before the big event – the usherettes cancelled. They were to have been the O'Connell girls, three sisters who live with their mother at the other end of the valley. Their bungalow is near the gates, and the first sight to greet visitors when they enter our community. The windows are surrounded by ivy, and the garden is flecked with flowers at any time of year. You couldn't ask for a better welcome.

The O'Connell girls are like their home, neat and pretty. The eldest is twenty-three, the youngest is nineteen, and for years they have been babysitting for us, looking after Tim and Susie when we wanted a break.

For the past few weeks, they had been contacting me regularly with updates on their uniforms: they had found some old material in a catalogue; they wanted more images to perfect the details; what should they carry in place of cigarettes? On Sunday night, the eldest, Janey, called me. She was so apologetic that I couldn't be angry. "Mummy

doesn't want us to do it," she said. "I told her not to be so silly, but she's absolutely obsessed. I'm so awfully sorry."

"No, that's fine. I can understand what she feels. She's only worried about your welfare."

"I know, I know, but we're old enough to look after ourselves. I am, anyway."

We chatted about the cinema. She asked how the arrangements were going. I said everything was working perfectly, but didn't admit that so few people had accepted, the usherettes would have outnumbered the audience.

I owned the posters, the publicity stills, the spools of film. I knew the history. Long-forgotten names had the power to stir my emotions. I had watched love films and war films and kung-fu films and films about films; detailed exposés of the Hollywood experience, complete with pouting starlets and manipulative producers; scenes of people in cinemas, watching a film within the film; even a film in which a woman is watching a film when one of the characters steps out of the screen and into her life. But for me, all these films had one thing in common: they had been solitary experiences. In what I had read about the movies, one fact was always stressed: they were a collective art form. Some critics see this as a flaw, saying that the movies served to dull an already lumpen population into total submissiveness. Other critics see this as a virtue, contrasting the exuberant, messy, vivacious crowds of the twentieth century with our narrow, restricted lives. Did I feel nostalgic for a more crowded time? Or did I want to reassure myself that our lives are safer and saner? Neither. I just wanted to know how it felt to watch a movie as part of an audience.

I was like a man who knows everything about sex while remaining a virgin. He has studied pornography. He has an intimate knowledge of the female anatomy. He has engaged in virtual orgies, losing himself to sensory pleasure without leaving the comfort of his armchair. He has had sex with real women, although they have been thousands of miles away, connected to him by the net. But he has never fondled the actual flesh of a woman; his orgasms have only thudded into the plastic and leather of his suit.

When I discussed my plans with Jude, she had several objections. Not the money (we have enough) nor the time (we have enough of that too), but the quixotic nature of the project. "You can't recreate

the past," she said. "We don't live like that any longer. Those places existed for a purpose. To fulfil a need. And we don't have that need."

"Aren't you interested?"

"Not really."

If Jude hadn't been so dismissive, I might have been more sensible, but her ridicule spurred me to prove her wrong. So, I built a cinema. I worked alone: Jude refused to help, and the kids were too young. I ordered the first materials in the autumn, and applied the finishing touches as spring arrived. In case the irony had escaped me, Jude pointed it out: "We're going to celebrate the sunshine by sitting in a dark room, are we?"

On Tuesday morning, I counted the acceptances. Including the four of us, there would be an audience of eleven. We could each have an entire row of seats. The cinema would be echoey and cold, with nothing of the rowdy, boisterous, communal atmosphere that I sought.

"Please don't say I told you so."

Jude grinned. "My lips are sealed," she said.

"But you're thinking it, aren't you?"

"I can stop myself saying something, but I can't stop myself thinking it."

"You could at least stop yourself showing that you're thinking it."

She laughed.

I would have liked to ask her advice, but couldn't bring myself to give her that satisfaction. Instead, I walked round the house and into the cinema. It was a glorious day. The sun had burnt away the early-morning mist. All along the valley, birds were singing, their songs mingling with the jingle-jangle of cowbells.

Inside the cinema, I sat in the front row, staring at the wide, white screen.

What should I do? Cancel the whole thing? Go ahead anyway, like some dictator who puts on a huge show for his solitary pleasure? Or try to persuade more people to come?

There wasn't really any option. I contacted the few people who had accepted, and told them not to bother. They sounded relieved rather than disappointed – all except Richard, who insisted on coming anyway. He said that he wanted to see us, particularly his niece and nephew, whom he hadn't seen for several months. They love him, to Jude's irritation, and not just because he brings extravagant presents.

He seems to understand them in a way that we can't, as if he hasn't forgotten what it felt like to be a child.

Had our neighbours reached a collective decision? Had they discussed the cinema, and decided not to attend? If so, I was especially discomfited, since we liked to think of ourselves as an integral part of the community.

"You're paranoid," Jude said. "There wasn't any discussion, let alone a conspiracy. People don't want to mingle with strangers, that's all. Why didn't you just invite people who live in the valley?"

"The cinema would have been half-empty."

"And how full is it going to be?"

I didn't answer that.

A few of my fellow hobbyists had sent congratulatory messages, but none of them wanted to make the journey. I should have known. After all, it was rare for anyone to venture through our gates. All deliveries are handled automatically. On the few occasions when unwelcome strangers have broken through our security systems, we have always managed to eject them quickly. And when was the last time that I visited another community? Before the birth of Tim, certainly. Maybe ten years ago, when I used to perform occasional site visits, installing computer equipment for major engineering projects.

Freddie Morrison walked over from his house and found me in the cinema. He said that he'd come to talk about the gypsies – apparently, the police had broken up a camp on the Welsh border, and some of them were expected to come our way – but I think he just wanted to see what was happening. I explained that the movie was cancelled, and invited him to bring his family for dinner with Richard.

"Aren't you going to watch it anyway?" he asked.

"No. That would just be a gesture. I can watch a movie on my own any time. And the kids get bored so quickly. The games they've got now, they can't be bothered with sitting in one place, staring at a screen. They don't have the patience for it."

"You can't turn back the clock," Freddie said.

"What do you mean?"

"It's not right for us, is it? Our time. We live differently. All this—" he gestured at the seats and the screen "—it's not how we live."

"But it's interesting to see how people used to live, isn't it?"

Freddie shrugged his shoulders. "Can't see much point, myself."

When he had gone, I thought about what he had said, and realised what to do. If we couldn't go back to the time of the movies, then the movies could move forward to ours.

Richard arrived at dusk. We were waiting for him, having been informed when he passed through the gate, and the kids ran down to his car, jumping gleefully at him as he stepped out. Richard is a short, thin man whose pale skin shows that he spends most of his life indoors, but he effortlessly swung Susie into the air and wheeled her around. Her high-pitched giggles echoed back to Jude and me as we walked down to join them.

"Hi," Richard shouted, putting Susie back on the grass, much to her annoyance. "My God, you look healthy. How do you do it?"

No one answered this question, but he probably hadn't expected or wanted an answer. Jude hugged him, I shook his hand, and Susie pulled his trouser leg, asking him to come and look at her house.

"You have a house of your own, do you?"

"Yes." She looked up at him from under her long lashes, and I saw how she would be in fifteen years' time, cunning and flirtatious.

Tim was standing to one side, fidgeting, irritated by the attention that his sister was securing for herself.

I said, "Do you have a bag?"

"Yes, it's in the boot. Leave it, please. I'll bring it. Hey, Tim! How do you like my new car!"

Tim shrugged his shoulders, determined not to show any enthusiasm. "Yeah, it's cool."

"Do you want to drive it?"

"Really?"

"If you want."

"Yeah!"

"Maybe later," said Jude, stepping forward and slipping her arm through Richard's. "You must be hungry."

"No, I had a big lunch."

"Do you want to wash? The movie starts in an hour."

"I thought it was cancelled."

"Change of plan," I said.

"Great," Richard said. "I've been looking forward to this. What's the movie?"

"Wait and see."

"Come inside," Jude said. "Let's have a drink."

Tim stayed by the car, staring wistfully through the window at the array of dials on the instrument panel. We don't need such vehicles here, since no-one drives further than the ten miles from one end of our valley to the other. The streamlined silhouette of Richard's car was a powerful expression of his life: fast enough to drive from London to Edinburgh in a couple of hours, strong enough to save him if he swerved off the road or got ambushed by gypsies.

Jude had prepared a small supper, and Richard went into his usual raptures over our produce. The freshness. The care that we put into everything. I can't help feeling an implied criticism in his praise, a jibe at our insularity and the dullness of our lives, chasing chickens and picking asparagus, but Jude says that I'm being paranoid. I ate quickly, then hurried over to the cinema, and made the final preparations.

At half past seven, they came to take their seats. Even Richard was impressed. He stood in the entrance for a few seconds, looking around, and said, "This is magnificent."

"Thanks," I shouted, not looking up from the projection equipment. I had practised repeatedly, but the process still made me nervous. With the added pressure of an audience, it wouldn't have surprised me if I had shown the reels in the wrong order or inserted one upside-down.

Susie played the usherette, saying, "This way, please." She led Richard, Jude and Tim down the aisle to the sixth row. The rest of the audience had already taken their seats, and four empty places were waiting in the middle of the row.

Opinions differ as to the best seat in a cinema. Right at the front, you get the full force of the experience. The people at the back might be having the most fun, but that won't have much to do with the movie. The purest experience, I think, comes sitting six rows from the front, right in the middle, and I had reserved this seat for myself. Richard and Jude sat on one side of it, Tim and Susie on the other. If they leaned across my seat, that would just add to the authenticity.

Several other seats were also reserved for me. Down at the front, far left and far right. A couple at the back. And one on the side, probably the worst seat in the house, near the door, draughty and uncomfortable, just so people could see the best and worst on offer.

I dimmed the lights, then switched on the microphones and cameras. I had spent the afternoon driving around the valley, borrowing

equipment from neighbours and alerting them to what I was doing.

I looked up. Everything was ready. From my perspective, at the back of the auditorium, I could see the screen, glowing in the darkness, and a sea of heads. Dotted among them, the cameras were obvious without being obtrusive. Before starting the show, I wanted to check how everything looked, so I put on a headset and flicked through the views. Some were better than others, of course, but together they gave an excellent impression of sitting in a crowded cinema. Every seat was taken.

I turned on the projection equipment. Up and down the valley, people would be sitting together, each family in their home, strapping on the headsets, switching from camera to camera, familiarising themselves with the cinema.

The titles sprang onto the screen. A spinning globe became a map of Europe. Arrows pushed across the map. A man started speaking: "With the coming of the Second World War, many eyes in imprisoned Europe turned hopefully, or desperately, toward the freedom of the Americas. Lisbon became the great embarkation point. But not everybody could get to Lisbon directly..."

I had seen this movie several times, so I could concentrate on watching people's reactions. As anticipated, Tim shuffled in his seat, unimpressed by the antiquated technology. Susie showed spurts of interest interspersed with long periods of irritated boredom, stretching, leaning back, staring at the ceiling or turning round to glare at where she thought I must be. She wouldn't have been able to see me: the bright eye of white light must have blanked me out. Jude and Richard were more attentive. I could tell from the silhouettes of their heads and shoulders that they were gripped by the onscreen events, just I had been when I first watched this movie. It seems amazing that a story can be so moving and involving, even funny, when told with such primitive tools. The pictures aren't even in colour!

During the afternoon, I had contacted a few fellow cineastes, and they spread the word. It's impossible to know how many people actually connected to the broadcast, but I guess that several thousand saw some of it, dipping in and out of the cinema as part of an evening's surfing.

I was surprised by how many people were fooled by the cardboard cutouts. "Wasn't it cancelled? That's what you told us. Who were those

people?" Oh, just friends, I replied. Friends who dropped by. I didn't tell them that Tim and Susie had spent the afternoon cutting silhouettes from cardboard, creating an audience of two hundred. In the flickering, reflected light from the screen, the cardboard audience came to life. From my perspective, standing at the back of the auditorium, I could imagine exactly what it must have been like to visit a cinema.

"Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." They walk across the tarmac together. As the screen faded into darkness, I switched off the cameras – not wanting to betray my cardboard secrets – then raised the lights. I couldn't help noticing that Jude was wiping her eyes. Tears? Or just a speck of dust? Richard started clapping, and the other three joined in. They all turned round in their seats to look at me. I turned off the projector, and took a little bow.

Jude put the kids to bed. It was late, and, as soon as the excitement was over, Susie had collapsed, falling asleep in Richard's lap, dribbling on his expensive shirt. Jude carried her into the house, followed by Tim, who was complaining bitterly at this injustice. "Don't worry," Jude said, "Richard will be here tomorrow. Won't you?"

"Of course I will," Richard said. "We've got to drive my car, haven't we?"

"Oh, yeah. Cool," Tim said, and followed Jude into the house, his enthusiasm undimmed by her saying, "Well, we'll see how we all feel in the morning."

Richard and I sat outside the house, drinking the excellent bottle of whisky he had brought. It was a cold, clear night. Wispy clouds moved across the sky. An owl hooted in the trees below us.

Richard told me how much he had enjoyed the movie, and complimented me on the authenticity of what we had experienced. "It's almost like the real thing."

"Thanks. Of course, we'll never know what it was really like. The atmosphere. The anticipation. Like this, a one-off, a special occasion, must be completely different to the feeling of just going to a movie on a Friday night. We'll never know what that feels like."

"Well, I do," said Richard.

"What do you mean?"

"I've been to several cinemas."

"Where?"

"In London. And Manchester."

"Oh, yes, I've heard that you can see the relics. Some of them have been converted to other uses, haven't they?"

"No," Richard said. "Real cinemas. Working. Showing movies. With an audience. I've never seen this movie, the one you showed, but I had heard of it. It's famous, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I can understand why. It was very good."

We sat in silence for a couple of minutes, staring at the stars. I wasn't sure if he was teasing me, and I didn't want to expose myself to further ridicule by questioning him, but curiosity overcame caution, and I asked, "Where exactly are these cinemas?"

"I told you. London and Manchester."

"I'm only asking because I've never heard of them."

"You lead a sheltered life, Nick. There are many things you've never heard of. The fences and the gates don't just keep out gypsies."

"We watch the news," I said.

"The news? You think that shows what's going on?"

"Yes. Why not? It's objective, isn't it?"

He laughed, and shook his head, as if he was not so much disagreeing with me as amused by my naivety. "Do you have any idea how the poor live? How people live in London or Manchester?"

"Yes. I've seen..."

"The news?"

I was forced to admit that I hadn't set foot in a city for at least twenty years. To be honest, I was surprised that he was surprised.

"I'm not criticising the way you live," Richard said. "I like this place. Your set-up is very nice. Very comfortable. But you shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that everybody lives like you. The poor live in cities that have hardly changed for two hundred years. Their misery and deprivation is dulled by drugs of various kinds. One of which is cinema. I've sat in a cinema with a thousand people, cheering and screaming, crying, laughing, forgetting their lives for a few minutes."

I still wasn't sure whether to believe him. I said, "Why do they go to a movie when there are so many better things on offer?"

"Because it's cheap. I'm going to London next week. Why don't you come with me? I'll take you to a movie. And, I promise, the audience won't be made of cardboard."

Jude emerged from the house, carrying a bowl of crisps, and we sat there for a couple of hours, watching the moon creep over the ridge and crawl across the sky. We chatted about the movie, discussing the glamour of the actors, the choices faced by the characters, the fascinating period detail. I related some snippets of trivia about the movie's history. The main actor, who seems so suited to his part, was only offered the role after several others had turned it down. The production was chaotic. The script bears the mark of many hands, and a good proportion of the dialogue was written on the set, including the whole of the last scene. In fact, they finished the rest of the film before deciding how it should end.

All the time, I was thinking about Richard's offer. I could leave Jude for a couple of days; Tim and Susie didn't need constant supervision. There was no urgent work to be done. Perhaps he was duping me, and I would take an arduous trip into the city only to be greeted by his laughter at my gullibility. On the other hand, I might have the chance to step inside a real, working, populated cinema.

The following morning, Richard left at six. I waved him off, but the kids were still asleep. When Tim got up, and realised that his uncle had gone, he had to hold back his tears. He was depressed for a couple of days, until Richard called to apologise. Tim came to find me. "It's Uncle Richard," he said. "He wants to speak to you."

Richard's face beamed down at me from the screen. "So, do you think Tim will ever forgive me?"

"Oh, I should think he's forgiven and forgotten already."

"I hope so. I said I'd be back soon."

"Whenever you want, come and stay. Seriously. It's always good to see you."

"Thanks." Richard smiled at me, and didn't speak, as if he was waiting for me to say something. The silence lasted for a few seconds. Then, he said, "So, have you decided?"

"About what?"

"You know what."

I did, of course. "I don't think I can make it this time. I've got a deadline coming up."

"You shouldn't work so hard."

"Well, yes, I know. Listen, next time, I'd love to come. I really would."

"Sure. I'll let you know. Say hi to Judith."

I promised to send his love to everyone, and we said our goodbyes. He knew I was lying about the deadline, but he prevented himself from saying anything or letting his contempt show in his face.

That afternoon, I dismantled the cinema. ●

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Spectrum SF #5

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The Atrocity Archive – Charles Stross (part 1). The Kéthani Inheritance – Eric Brown. Crew Dog – Mary Soon Lee. The Pilgrim – Josh Lacey. Green England – David Redd. Plus an Editorial, The Archive and Letters.

Our regular readers will need no introduction to Michael Coney and Eric Brown. Michael has published two of his 'Peninsula' stories in these pages (POPPY DAY, SPECTRUM SF #5, February 2001 & MEHITABEL'S MEMORIES, SPECTRUM SF #6, July 2001). Fans should note that one of his 'Mrs Masterton' stories, A CHIMP OF FEW WORDS, will appear here soon.
Eric has appeared in all the issues of SPECTRUM SF so far and a new 'Kethani' novelette, THURSDAY'S CHILD, is on hand for a future issue. Cosmos Books recently published his collection, DEEP FUTURE. His website can be found at www.ericbrown.co.uk.
This is their first collaboration.

THE TREES OF TERPSICHORE THREE

MICHAEL CONEY & ERIC BROWN

The exploration of Terpsichore Three was not going well.

That was my impression following yet another stormy meeting in the proto-colony's community dome. But then, as my father is fond of reminding me: what the hell do I know about colony politics or anything else?

"It's always like this, Jon," Alan Wiseman assured me the following morning. "Every advance party splits into two factions, sooner or later."

"Two factions?"

"Those who feel humans must adapt to the planet, and those who feel the planet must adapt to humans. It goes with the territory, with the job. You always find Ecology and its branches on one side, and Technology and its branches on the other. It's the nature of the beasts."

"Which puts me and my dad on opposite sides."

"You don't need to be members of the same advance party for that to happen."

Alan is Manager of Botany and I'm one of his underlings, although it never feels like that. A veteran of a dozen or so planetary explorations, he knows his job backwards and he knows how to treat the people who work for him. Tall, grey-haired and quietly spoken, he has a knack of getting to the heart of any problem and enunciating clearly the alternative solutions. This does not endear him to the opposition. I've

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seen my dad, the Chief of Security, actually fingering the butt of his laser pistol when Alan's destroying a specious argument with his usual devastating logic.

"Dad's a trigger-happy moron," I mumbled.

Alan was having none of that. "He has a job to do. He does it well." He gestured at the forest around us. "We don't know what's out there yet. We do know the satellite overview showed up plenty of warm spots on the mainland. All right, the chances are that the vast majority of these are herbivores, but where you find herbivores, you'll usually find predators, and the ground-based survey parties have come across recent kills. Your dad's responsible for the safety of over two hundred people here. And we haven't lost a single one."

"Not yet."

He said nothing, but gave me the pained look of a gentle soul, nearing the end of his career. When the main body of colonists arrive and we're shipped elsewhere, he'll stay and retire here on Terpsichore. He's even staked out the site where he'll build his house; on a small promontory overlooking the narrow strait between our island settlement and the huge continental mainland. He's built a cabin there, and he cultivates a small vegetable patch. He calls it a research outstation to satisfy regulations; and he sleeps there alone. The high-level infrared survey showed no warm spots on the island, therefore no warm-blooded predators. That's why we chose the island as our first base.

He paused at a fork in the trail. A big, old wildwood stood here, many-branched, maybe ten metres tall. Alan laid a hand on the short yellow trunk, just above the line of the join with its symbiotic root system. There was no wind, but I heard the fronds rustling. I expected the plant to recoil, as they usually do – they're very nervous. Perhaps something used to prey on them; perhaps still does.

A branch drooped.

"Look out!" I shouted.

But Alan merely smiled. The branch touched his head, then ran its fronds through his hair, gently. A caress.

"Not an official experiment," he said, grinning at me in a slightly embarrassed way. "I leave that stuff to you and Suzanne at the trial site. You test the reaction of your wildwoods to prescribed stimuli, but those stimuli don't include kindness."

Sometimes I think poor old Alan is a bit of a nut case. Eccentric,

certainly. Maybe it made him feel good, to think this alien plant liked him. But maybe the wildwood was responding for reasons that we simply can't understand. Terpsichore plants are strange.

Then I heard a scream.

Suzanne came running down the trail towards us.

The trial site consists of a dozen wildwoods in a natural clearing. In the six years we've been on Terpsichore they've grown to a respectable height; four metres or so. There are other sites on the island but these are mostly for trials of Earth-bred food crops. My plants are native, and Suzanne and I study them for information about the ecological history of Terpsichore. Because these are very unusual plants.

They *remember*.

That's not the only unusual thing about them. They can also uproot and move. And each wildwood consists of two creatures, rather like the terrestrial Portuguese man-of-war. The trunk hatches from a pod and lies flat on the ground emitting pheromones and eventually rots away if a root system doesn't find it and nourish it. The rootstocks live in the shallows like octopuses, emerging onto land once a year to look for a trunk. A vehicle for photosynthesis and a mate. Suzanne always refers to the trunk as 'she' and the rootstock as 'he', a habit that is beginning to rub off on me.

And once a year the wildwoods produce two kinds of flower, one for each sex, which emit wind-borne pollen that fertilises the flowers of the opposite sex on other plants. We've discovered that a plant can't fertilise its own flowers, which makes evolutionary sense.

"I found him like this when I got here," Suzanne said, still shaking. She was looking everywhere except at the body, which lay face-down in the centre of the clearing. The dead man was heavy set, dressed in overalls and working boots. His hair was dark, and although I couldn't see his face I was pretty sure who it was. His very stillness told me he was dead. There was little blood visible, just a few spots near his waist. Alan knelt beside the body, feeling the neck for a pulse. He shook his head.

I felt sick with horror. I'm not used to death; none of us are. Members of exploration parties don't die; there are too many safeguards. I swallowed heavily. "Maybe we should turn him over." It seemed wrong

to leave him like that, with his face half buried in dead vegetable matter. It was as though Terpsichore had claimed him for itself and drained him of his humanity.

"Better leave him for Security," Alan said. "There may be clues."

"Are Security the right people for the job?" I asked. It was a stupid question but I think I resented the thought of my dad being involved. "Their job's to protect us from hostile beings, isn't it?"

"And to protect us from one another," Alan said. It was an odd thing to say, and it took me a moment to get his meaning.

"I'll go and get Chief McGregor," Suzanne said quickly, glad of an excuse to get away.

When she'd gone I said, "Uh, Alan... This is Tom, isn't it?"

Tom Neudecker was Alan's boss, the Director of Ecology. A good guy, a strong honest man, and a worthy opponent of the Technology rednecks.

Alan nodded. "It's Tom all right. There's a wound near his waist; you can just see it. Looks like a burn. Laser. We'll know more when they turn him over."

I glanced around the clearing, at the circle of trial wildwoods, at the forest beyond. A thousand fronds waved in the light breeze. Everything looked normal out there. Except...

Something was different. It wasn't just the body affecting my impressions of this familiar spot. There was something else I couldn't put my finger on.

My dad arrived a few minutes later, roaring down the trail in a tank-like vehicle almost too wide to pass between the wildwoods, accompanied by a team of armed goons. He jumped to the ground, wearing that fierce grin I know so well, staring at us accusingly. "Has anyone touched the body?"

"Only to establish death," Alan said tiredly.

"Right," Dad said, once his men had taken a few photos. "Let's take a look at him." He showed no emotion; only brisk efficiency. He bent down and took the dead man's shoulders in his big hands, heaved at the upper part of the body and rolled it over.

But the legs stayed where they were. The body was cut virtually in half, pivoting loosely at the base of the spine.

Dad stumbled away, grabbed a wildwood for support and threw up violently. I'd have felt sorry for him if I hadn't been throwing up myself.

Eventually he said, "Turn the poor sod back the way he was,

someone, for God's sake. And call the ambulance. We need a stretcher for this."

The four goons were staring at one another across Tom's body. They didn't move. Eventually Dad lurched across the clearing, his eyes streaming, elbowed his men out of the way and did the job himself. Then he regarded us, panting with the effort and wiping his mouth.

He tried to return to his normal manner. "Accident?" he said, "Or murder? I wonder. You two will come back with me for questioning. I've told Suzanne to stay in her quarters. She's in poor shape."

"We're all in poor shape," Alan said mildly. "We're not used to this kind of thing, McGregor. Are you?"

Dad regarded him coldly. "Nobody's used to this kind of thing. Have you people been waving pruning lasers about again? If I've told Tom once I've told him a thousand times. Any laser's a lethal weapon in the hands of a kid botanist."

Alan said, "We banned all pruning a year ago."

"Glad you came to your senses."

Alan sighed. "Our people are fully trained in the use of pruners. They're aware of the danger. They're not fools. We banned pruning because the wildwoods didn't like it."

"Didn't *like* it? They're only bloody *plants*, for God's sake!"

"They were showing signs of leaving the island. A general movement down the causeway at low tide. So now we use other means of keeping the trails clear. The pruners are all locked away, and before you ask, there's only one key and I have it."

"I'll need to inspect your security arrangements."

"You'll find them satisfactory. This man was not killed with a pruner. So who else has access to laser weapons?"

That stymied Dad, because the only other people with lasers were his own staff. He stared at Alan for a moment, then grunted and strode off across the clearing, staring at the trial wildwoods. He held a muttered conversation with his goons and they spread out beyond the site, examining the ground. After a while they returned and grouped around the vehicle to compare notes.

Dad approached us. "OK, let's get going."

"I'm surprised there's no sign of damage to the wildwoods," I said. "With a wound this severe, the laser must have been on full power. You'd expect to find a tree or two burned as well, wouldn't you?"

I was trying to help, but I was wasting my time. Dad said simply,

"You stick to your job, son, and I'll stick to mine." When he called me 'son' he wasn't acknowledging our relationship. He never does, in public. He was simply acknowledging that I am younger than he is, and therefore not worth listening to.

"So perhaps he wasn't killed here," Alan suggested. "He may have been killed somewhere else and dumped here."

"All right. All right. I've already thought of that. Now let's get back to base, shall we? You men, widen the search. We're looking for a plant, or plants, with a burned trunk. Should be easy to find, so don't spend all day on it. Fifty metres' radius should be enough."

As we climbed into the vehicle I realised what had been bothering me about the trial site.

It consisted of twelve wildwoods arranged in a circle.

But now there were only eleven.

Dad's manner during the subsequent inquisition was so abominable that I failed to tell him about the missing wildwood. Why the hell should I help him do his job? He started off by practically accusing Suzanne of murdering Tom.

"Everybody knows Neudecker couldn't keep his hands off the women," he said, giving her the full wattage of his pop-eyed stare. "Did he ever try anything on with you?"

"Never. I didn't even know he was… that way."

"You'd have been well within your rights in defending yourself," he said cunningly. "Don't you agree?"

"Not to the point of murder." Suzanne kept her cool. "Anyway, I don't have a pistol."

"Only Security has pistols," I reminded him.

He turned a nasty purple colour. He raved on for quite a while, referring to the Botany group as airy-fairy fools hugging big plants, their lives totally dependant on the goodwill of Security, while Alan, Suzanne and I watched him with interest. I've always found it pays to smile a little while Dad's throwing one of his tantrums; it prolongs the fun. Finally he dismissed us, and Suzanne and I made our way into the fresh air, while Alan left us for his laboratory. He likes lab work, which is convenient because Suzanne and I prefer fieldwork.

We headed though the settlement towards the trial site.

"Sorry about Dad," I said. "He can be a bastard. It's nothing personal. He's like that with everyone."

"It's OK," Suzanne said, adding after a moment, "You must have had it tough as a kid."

We'd never discussed our childhoods, which is not so odd as it may seem. People have to take one another as they find them, on pre-colony duty. It's a kind of unwritten rule. The present and the near future are all-important; the past is irrelevant. When the job's finished, unattached people are posted elsewhere with scant regard for human relationships. It's pure bad luck that I've found myself in the same team as Dad.

"Mom was killed when I was five." I felt I owed Suzanne an explanation, after Dad's behaviour. "She was in Personnel. I remember her as a really nice, kind lady. A land-crab got into our temporary quarters on Altair VI two nights after we touched down. Those crabs inject a dissolving fluid, then they wait around. I remember Dad hauling me out of the tent next morning before I could see her. As I understand it, Security had wanted to burn a three kilometre safe zone around the base, and Ecology had vetoed it on the basis that they had not yet established that any local species were harmful. They hadn't had time to investigate the land crabs. So now Dad's a bit touchy."

"It's OK," Suzanne said again, embarrassed. She changed the subject hastily. "So why would anyone want to kill poor old Tom? He was a pretty harmless guy, really."

"That was just Dad talking. You have to understand him. And anyway, who said we're talking about murder? Only Dad. There's a chance it was an accident."

She was quiet for a while, and then said, "That big meeting this morning. There was an awful lot of hostility."

"Just the usual Technology versus Ecology stuff."

"Good grief, Jon! Technology wanted to terraform the whole planet immediately, and Security was right with them! What's happening to the scientific approach? If it hadn't been for Tom's veto, they'd be wiping out every indigenous species at this very moment!"

"There have got to be compromises if we're going to colonise," I said mildly. She's an idealist, Suzanne. And Tom's alternative had been expensive, admittedly, consisting of setting up small human trial sites in areas that had been thoroughly researched.

"And now with Tom out of the way they can do what they like!"

"Alan's in charge of Ecology now, I think. At least temporarily. He won't let them get away with anything."

"Alan's marking time until he retires. He's weak. You know what I

think? They got Tom out of the way to speed up colonisation. I mean, we haven't exactly been moving fast here on Terpsichore."

I didn't like the way she was thinking, but the words had a plausible ring to them. If Tom had been murdered there had to be a reason. "You say, 'They'. Who's 'They'?"

"Bigwigs on Earth. Investors. Working through Technology and its branches like Security..."

"I can't see Dad having anything to do with murder," I said. Dad's an idiot, but I have my loyalties.

"Not your dad, specifically. He may be a bully, but I think he's honest. No, Jon, however you look at it, it's the technical side who profit with Tom dead and Alan in his place."

We walked on, mulling over possibilities, and eventually arrived at the test site. "One thing I'm sure of, Jon. You'll find the investigation won't get anywhere. Tom may have been killed somewhere else and dumped here in the forest. Both Alan and your dad seemed to think that was a possibility. That makes it difficult to check out alibis. Particularly when there's probably a conspiracy involved. People vouching for one another and so on. I don't envy your dad his job."

It was a peace offering. "Maybe we can give him a hand," I said.

"He won't thank you for that."

"For one thing, I'm sure Tom was killed right here where you found him. And we can prove it."

"Oh, yes?" She had that dubious look again, rather annoying. You'd think she'd believe in me by now.

"Have you counted the wildwoods lately? Take a look."

She ran her eyes around the trial site. "There's only eleven," she said, surprised.

"One wildwood missing. One wildwood that got burned at the same time as Tom Neudecker, maybe. So what do these plants do, when they're injured?"

We'd experimented with that kind of thing, pruning or felling plants to clear pathways. That was before we realised the wildwoods were capable of feeling pain and would move aside of their own accord if we went about it the right way.

"They go away," she said thoughtfully. "They crawl away and hide."

"So somewhere out there, there could be a wildwood with a burn across its trunk, hiding from humans."

The next day we had a new life-form to test. A survey team had encountered a slug-like creature on the mainland: about two metres long and slow-moving, but possessing a venomous sting at the tail end. When threatened, it had burrowed rapidly into the soft ground, simultaneously changing both its colour and texture so that it resembled the soil itself. An almost perfect disguise, undetectable until someone trod on it... The lab had done its work on the creature, and now we had a specimen for field trials. It had been delivered to the site and lay in its cage, antennae questing this way and that.

We'd lifted the gate and the slug was creeping out of the cage when Dad's boss, the Director of Technology, Ted "Chimp" Brinkley, ambled into the clearing. Short and bandy-legged, with undeniably simian features, his nickname was appropriate although never used in his presence.

He eyed the slug with disgust. "What the hell is that?"

Suzanne explained, but Chimp wasn't listening. He was glancing around the clearing from under low brows. "This the place where they found Tom?" he asked suddenly, interrupting Suzanne in full flow.

"Over there." I pointed.

He strolled over to where I'd indicated and gazed at the ground impassively, hairy hands clasped behind his back like a mourner at a graveside. "He didn't bleed much, did he?"

"Laser burns don't bleed a lot."

He sniffed loudly. "The guy was cut in half. What about the arteries and stuff? Your dad could be right. Maybe he was killed somewhere else and dumped here. Unless there's something about the terrain we don't know. Ants, whatever. You Ecology people have barely scratched the surface... Hell, it's not my problem. Just interested, that's all." He scuffed at the ground with his boot, peering at the result. Then he turned his attention to the forest. "And why all this fascination with a bunch of plants? You people should be worrying about carnivores. Things that do damage. Things that kill. Danger to the colony. That's what Ecology is all about, am I right or not?"

I found the implied criticism infuriating. "Alan has a theory the wildwoods could protect us from predators. They have unusual properties. There are no predators on the island, right? Alan thinks the wildwoods have made it too uncomfortable for them, over a few millennia."

He uttered a snort of derision. "Alan thinks, Alan thinks... Too much

thinking and not enough action, if you ask me. Uncomfortable for predators, eh? Why the hell don't we simply wipe them out?"

He knew why, of course. He was just trying to needle us, and we couldn't answer back because he outranked us.

Fortunately the slug provided a diversion at that point. Freed from the cage, it was approaching the nearest wildwood. The loose soil around the base of the wildwood began to ripple as the shallow roots shifted.

Brinkley uttered a grunt of surprise. "Look at that!"

The tree's reaction was commonplace to us because we'd imported various creatures from the mainland for these experiments. But Chimp, apparently, had spent his time in his own little world of technological gadgets. Or to be fair, administration of his various teams. I explained, "The wildwood doesn't like the slug. It's thinking about moving away, or maybe attacking."

"But it can't see the slug. How does it know it's there?"

"That's something we'd like to know. It senses the presence somehow."

Suddenly a branch slashed down across the slug's back, scattering waxy fronds. The slug, undeterred, extended a forked tongue and delicately picked up a frond, conveying it to its large underslung mouth. Although the frond was as long as the creature itself, it was consumed in less than five seconds.

"Christ, look at that!" exclaimed Chimp. "The bugger must be hungry."

"It hasn't eaten since yesterday," Suzanne pointed out.

"All the same..."

I knew what he meant; and so, it seemed, did the wildwood. This was a voracious adversary. The plant began to heave its short roots from the ground and back away. The slug moved forward, uttering a rapid clicking sound. I switched on the recorder. Later we could play back the sound to a different wildwood, and note the reaction. Could the plants hear, or did other senses come into play?

Meanwhile the wildwood was tottering backwards and the plants behind it were preparing to move, too. Trunks lurched, fronds swayed.

"Can't you stop it?" Brinkley demanded, alarmed. "The slug'll catch up with that bush in a moment." He'd taken sides. The slug was a repulsive creature and Chimp was no biologist. He drew his laser pistol.

"No!" I shouted.

"We must see what happens," Suzanne explained. "It's the first time we've observed an attack on a wildwood since we banned pruning. This is interesting."

What happened was similar to the wildwoods' reaction to pruning. The tree retreated steadily, leaving a churned and rutted trail of soil which slowed the slug's progress. The creature gave up the idea of pursuit and settled down to munch on the remaining fronds.

"The slug's fattening itself up ready to take on the whole bloody island," Chimp said nervously. "Just look at the way it's growing. It must have a hell of a metabolism. It's a menace to the colony. I'm going to have to put the bastard down, whether you like it or not."

"Leave it alone," I said. "I'll take the responsibility."

"You? Good grief, man, you don't have the authority!"

"I do here. This is a simple biological matter and this is a trial site. Everything's under control. I'll let you know the moment we need to bring the lasers in."

He stared at me for a moment, then shrugged. "Be it on your own head, Jonathan." He ambled around the clearing, examining the ground carefully, comparing it with the photographs taken by Dad's team.

Suzanne said, "Jon's dad seemed to think Tom was brought here dead."

"He may have changed his mind." Chimp glanced my way. "The medics say it would've been impossible for someone to move Tom, say load him onto a wagon, without him, er..." His voice trailed away. He meant without him falling apart. We all knew it; there was no need to say as much.

We stood for a while, staring down at the spot where Tom Neudecker died, and the clearing was silent apart from the relentless chomping of the slug.

A side-effect of Tom Neudecker's death was that Alan Wiseman became acting Director of Ecology pending the decision from Earth as to Tom's permanent replacement. Alan was counting the days to retirement and in no mood for fresh responsibilities, so I think the committee's decision to promote him, rather than one of the other Ecology managers, had more to do with a desire to honour him in his last few months than any judgement as to his suitability.

A couple of days after Tom's death, I decided to take some of the

load off Alan's shoulders by listing the status of the various botanical research projects, discussing them with him, and reviewing priorities. Alan had become bogged down with administration, and one or two projects had already stalled as a result. So that evening I made excuses to Suzanne and settled down at the terminal in our unit.

It was an undemanding job. Somewhat illegally, I hacked into Tom's area of the network. Nobody worries about that kind of thing in a small colony; we can have few secrets from one another. I found, as I had expected, that the biggest project was our own: the life cycle and sensory perceptions of the wildwoods. Obviously Tom had been very interested in this one; he had recorded conclusions he'd drawn from our work and made a few complimentary comments. There were notes of meetings with myself and Alan, and references to meetings to which he had attached a higher security level, password protected. These were none of my business and probably dealt with personnel matters. So in less than an hour I was able to print out everything I needed for my discussion with Alan.

"Coming to bed, then?" Suzanne said, leaning over me in a tempting way.

"In a minute."

"You've hacked into Tom's stuff," she said accusingly, peering at the screen.

"All in the course of business. Alan will never get round to it."

"Yes, but... It seems kind of callous. With Tom hardly cold, I mean."

"Life must go on. We can't let people goof off just because our new boss has too much on his plate."

She hesitated, then gave way to temptation. "What's he say about our stuff?"

"Seemed happy enough." I didn't mention the protected files because I could tell her curiosity had been aroused and she'd want me to open them. And I could have, of course. I'm good at that kind of thing.

Which brought me to my own curiosity, and a little itch that had been jiggling about in my mind.

"Would you like to know how Dad's investigation is coming along?"

"What?" she squeaked in horrified delight. "You mean, clues and suspects and alibis and all that stuff? You could bring all that up? Do it, Jon!"

I pretended to hesitate. "Well, I don't know... It's strictly illegal."

"Do it! Do it, or you can sleep on the couch tonight!"

Ten minutes later I was into Security's private files. Fascinated, we read the forensic report and minutes of the discussion that followed. Then Dad's diary, and the diaries of his men. We looked at countless photographs.

"There's a hell of a lot of guff for two days work," Suzanne said, boredom creeping in. "Not very exciting, is it?"

"That's the way investigations are, I guess. Look, this is better. Here are people's statements. And Dad's eliminations... Look, these are the people with no alibis. It's a hell of a long list. They're never going to solve this one."

It certainly looked that way. All that data could be reduced to one essential fact; that progress since the day Suzanne had discovered Tom's body had been nil.

"Very thorough," said Suzanne. "There's just one thing missing."

"Yes?"

"I didn't see your dad's own statement"

"He can hardly make a statement to himself."

"Someone else could have taken it down. For completeness. And he's not on the list of people without alibis. Does that mean he has one? Or does it mean he just didn't put his own name down? They've established the time of death at between two and three hours before I found the body. What was your dad doing then, I wonder?"

I felt obscurely annoyed. "OK, you don't like him any more than I do. But that's ridiculous."

Then I felt her shaking against me. She was laughing. "But I had you going, didn't I?"

"All right. Let's go to bed."

"No, don't switch it off. Now we're into your dad's stuff I'm curious. I'd like to know what makes the old swine tick. Bring up his curriculum vitae."

And so we spent the next half hour working our way through Dad's life history, from the cradle on. All impersonal stuff; the early notes working towards the decision that he was suitable for colonisation work, then the choice of career made on the basis of aptitude tests, then the training; we've all been through it. No room for personal decisions; a life mapped out in advance.

Then at last a real choice, his marriage to Mum. And then my birth. And then...

"Maybe we've seen enough," Suzanne said.

And then Altair VI.

"No, it's all right."

There were videos of the camp. People inflating tents, people assembling machinery, the shuttle towering over it all. Dad, looking young and laughing. Mum, pretty in her coveralls. Me, five years old. The three of us were as much strangers to me now as the other people, with their forgotten faces.

The scene switched. A group of people, looking down, murmuring.

A close-up. Something on the ground.

"Oh, no!" Suzanne cried, reaching for the OFF key.

I had a brief glimpse of the sight my father had protected me from all those years ago, as I knocked Suzanne's hand aside, reversed the sequence and froze the image.

"There. Who's that?" I zoomed in.

The sorrowing group. My father, face twisted with grief and anger, confronting someone. Someone, I realised in a flash, who had refused to exterminate a local species, rightly or wrongly. And one of those land crabs had killed my mother.

I resumed the sequence and eliminated all but one of the voices.

And heard my father say, *"You'll pay for this, Tom Neudecker!"*

At noon the following day I left the trial site and made for the mess dome. Ananda Kapoor and Chad Corbett were the only other diners. I took my tray to a table at the far end of the room, sat down and stared out of the viewport, hoping they'd take the hint and leave me alone. The image of my mother's remains, and my father's ringing vow, filled my head. The implications were obvious and sickening.

The hills rose in gentle folds towards the island's central mountains. I could see the trial site on the hillside, and the green-uniformed figures of the Botany team. Normally, the sight would have filled me with pleasure. Terpsichore is a beautiful planet, and I had been enjoying my time working here. Now, my thoughts were in turmoil.

I was considering whether I should present my findings to Chimp Brinkley – after all, he is Dad's boss – when I sensed someone standing behind me.

"Jon… I hope I'm not interrupting."

I turned. Ananda Kapoor was smiling at me, but uncertainly. "What is it?"

Three years ago I'd had a short-lived affair with Ananda. For a couple

of months I thought I'd been in love, before Ananda finished with me. She'd told me that it had never been anything but a fling, for her. We'd maintained a strained relationship ever since, civil towards each other only because of the necessities of duty.

She slipped into the opposite seat, trim in her light blue Admin one-piece.

"Jon, I need to see you about..." she hesitated, "about Tom Neudecker. I didn't feel it right to go straight to Brinkley with this. You see, I was passing the trial site an hour or two before... before Tom was killed."

My stomach turned. She knew something, or had seen something that would incriminate... who?

My father, obviously.

"Tell me, Ananda."

Her slim brown fingers twisted on the tabletop. "Well, I was passing the trial site, on my way to the communications dome. I was in my buggy. I go by that way almost every day—"

"Ananda, will you get to the point?"

She nodded. "Anyway, I saw Tom there. He was with someone – I couldn't see who it was, at first. He seemed to be... I don't know. But it struck me that he was arguing. He was gesturing, and I could tell from his face that he was angry."

My heart was pounding. "Who was the other person?"

"I couldn't see at first, a tree was in the way. So. I slowed down." She stopped, regarding her fingers.

I said, "It's okay, I think I know who was with Tom that morning. It was my father, wasn't it?"

She looked up, her eyes wide. She shook her head. "No, no... Not your father. It was Suzanne."

I experienced, then, a sudden flush of hot and cold sweats. At last I brought myself to say, "What did you see, Ananda?"

She could not bring herself to look me in the eye. "They were arguing. It seemed pretty heated. I saw Tom reach out for her, pull her towards him—"

"And Suzanne resisted, right?"

Then she looked at me, and I detected compassion in her eyes. She nodded. "She tried to pull away. That was as much as I saw. I thought, what business is it of mine, anyway? I drove off and forgot all about it, until..."

I nodded. "Thanks. I'll talk to Suzanne." I said this in a tone of dismissal.

But Ananda remained seated. "There's something else. Tom Neudecker was a good friend of Chad..." She turned in her seat and looked across the dome at Chad Corbett. Reluctantly, it seemed, he rose and crossed to our table.

He came straight to the point. "Ananda told me, Jon. I thought it best if she told you first. Tom was a good friend and he confided in me."

"About what, exactly?"

He shrugged. "He had a thing about Suzanne. I know they met a couple of times. He was head over heels. I... I don't think there was anything much in it so far as Suzanne was concerned." He stopped, and I detected his doubt.

"So you think that Suzanne—" I began.

"I think nothing of the kind, Jon. But I thought you ought to know, okay? Maybe Suzanne saw something that morning..."

I nodded. I pushed my meal away untouched, hurried from the dome and drove up to the trial site, where Suzanne and the rest of the team were observing the habits of the slug-analogue. By the time I brought the buggy to a halt, I had cooled down somewhat.

Suzanne was scanning her soft screen. She was alone, and looked up when I approached, blessing me with her beautiful smile.

"Hi, Jon. Where did you disappear to? We've just got some interesting results back from the..." Then something in my manner must have alerted her. "Jon?"

I took her arm and pulled her behind a stand of wildwoods, out of sight of the rest of the team, and repeated more or less what Ananda had told me, without revealing my source.

She was silent for a while, staring at me. At last she said, "Who told you, Jon? Who was it?"

"That doesn't matter. You were with Tom Neudecker before he died. You were arguing—"

"That bitch Kapoor, right? I *thought* I saw her buggy."

"Suzanne, why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"I... I don't think it'd look too good if your father got to know," she said in a small voice.

"As if I'd tell him!" I said. "Look, what was going on between you and Tom?"

She looked shocked. "Going on? You make it sound like..." She

stopped there, staring at me. "Christ, you don't think me and Tom were—?"

"You and Tom were seen together," I began.

Her expression of incredulity turned to rage. "Of course we were! How could I avoid him? He was practically chasing me. I didn't want to tell you… I could handle it myself. I told him that I loved you and didn't feel anything for him."

"But he persisted?"

"He was a bastard," she whispered. "I hated him."

I watched her. The sour sensation of jealousy abated, to be replaced by an awful suspicion. "Did you hate him sufficiently," I said, "to shoot him dead the other morning?"

Her eyes widened, appalled. Then she turned and hurried away before I could even begin to apologise.

I hurried from the trial site and gunned the engine of my buggy. I had no idea where I was heading until I came to my senses and found myself driving through the coastal meadows towards the headland where Alan had built his cabin.

His buggy was parked beside it, and I found him around the back. He was sitting on a home-made bench, staring out over his land: a twenty-metre by ten patch of well-dug soil full of vegetables, some Terran, some native.

"Jon, this is a surprise. Take a seat."

It was only the second time I had ever visited his private homestead, and I was surprised by how much it had developed since my first visit. The interior of the cabin was fitted out with furnishings obviously taken from his own accommodation dome, and the garden was extensive and well-kept.

He peered at me. "You look as though you could use a drink." Before I could reply, he moved into his cabin. A minute later he returned with two glasses of what looked like scotch. He nodded. "The real thing," he said, passing me a glass. "An '85 single malt, direct from Aberdeen Starport."

He sat beside me and gazed at the central mountains. At last he asked, gently, "What is it?"

I let the silence stretch. I've never been that good at expressing emotions. How could I be, with a father as cold and uncommunicative as mine? Now I found it hard to articulate my thoughts.

"Is it about Tom?" Alan asked quietly.

I nodded, sipped my whisky. The liquid burned a path down my throat.

Alan said, "It's a terrible business. All death is appalling, but this…" He shook his head. "How's your father's investigation coming along?"

I found my voice. "That's what I came here about," I said.

He turned to me. "He's found something?" he asked, sitting up.

"No. I have."

The silence stretched. Alan sipped his whisky, waiting for me to continue. At last I said, "You see, I've come across reasons why someone would want Tom Neudecker dead."

"And you don't like what you've found, is that it?" he gazed at me with his calm, grey eyes. That's what always reassures me about Alan – his understanding.

"I don't like what I've found," I agreed.

He sighed. "Are you going to tell me?"

So I told him. I told him all about what I'd discovered in my father's com-files, the documents relating to Altair-VI and Tom Neudecker's involvement.

Alan listened patiently as I stumbled along, getting emotional from time to time and losing the thread. "So you see," I said at last. "My father had a real reason to hate Tom. He had the opportunity, access to weapons…"

Alan lifted a hand. "You're jumping to conclusions, Jon. Okay, so your father had the motive. But that was… how many years ago, now? Fifteen, twenty?"

I drank another whisky and let the alcohol soothe my nerves. I wanted to tell Alan about Suzanne, too; about her meeting with Tom Neudecker just before his messy death. But I couldn't bring myself to drag her name into all this.

"Jon," Alan said finally. "If I were you I'd leave the investigations to the experts."

"You mean my father!" I almost laughed.

Our talk turned to more general matters after that. I admired the cabin and the garden. Alan's gaze turned dreamy as he stared out.

I said, "And you're going to remain here after our work is done and we move onto the next planet?"

He nodded. "I've had a long life in the service. Terpsichore is the most beautiful place I've ever been posted to. It's a strange feeling, finally

finding somewhere that feels like home. What an irony. I've travelled hundreds of light years through the inhabited sector to find a place where I belong."

The sun was going down on another short Terpsichorean day when I finally roused myself, said goodbye to Alan, and drove off.

I was about a kilometre from his cabin when I saw the bright red buggy of the Security team heading my way. It flashed its headlamps and slewed to a halt. Seeing the squat, bellicose shape of my father behind the wheel, I braked.

He jumped out, rounded his buggy and stood on the track, staring at me. "So there you are. I should have known you'd be out this way."

"What—?" I began.

"I'm in my official capacity as head of Security now, Jonathan. This is a formal meeting. If you'd care to follow me back to the Security HQ..."

I shook my head in bewilderment. "What's going on?" I said, feeling a presentiment of dread.

"I'll tell you when we're back at HQ."

Reluctantly, I boarded my buggy and followed him back along the coast. Five minutes later we came to the security dome, situated in the centre of the settlement.

A minute later I was facing him a cross the desk.

"There's been a development," he began. "I want to know what you were doing between the hours of eight and eleven hundred on the morning of Sixthmonth, the 33rd."

I stared at him. "You can't seriously think that I...?"

"Son, do you think I like doing this? Do you, really? I have a job to do, and I must be seen to be doing it, scrupulously and without bias. If you'd care to answer my question."

"I was in my home dome," I said. "I had a couple of hours off before I began my shift."

"Was Suzanne with you?"

I thought back, and shook my head. "No, she was already working."

"So you have no alibi to account for your movements between the specified hours?"

I gestured helplessly. "Alibi? Why the hell do I need an alibi? You can't seriously suspect me of killing Tom Neudecker? Why the hell would I do a damned fool thing like that?"

He watched me. "You had the motive," he said calmly.

"Like hell I did!"

He had the decency to look pained, as if he found distasteful what he had to say next. "I have it on good authority that Tom Neudecker and Suzanne were conducting an affair. It's reasonable to hypothesise that you might have had an inkling of this, and harboured some measure of resentment against Tom Neudecker."

It was all I could do to remain in my seat and stare at my father; my initial urge was to leap up, dive over the desk and beat him to a bloody pulp.

"Suzanne and Tom were not having an affair," I said carefully. "Tom was infatuated with her. And anyway, even if they had been…" I stood up and leaned over the desk. "Even if they had been, do you seriously think that I'd take a laser and kill him?"

He didn't relent. "In my official capacity," he said, "I must consider every possibility."

I turned and hurried from the dome.

I hit the mess dome and ordered a whisky, then a second and a third. It was locally brewed swill, not a patch on Alan's fine malt, but it worked all the same. By the time I reached my home dome, I was more than a little drunk. Suzanne was not there, for which I was grateful.

I sat before the com-console, staring at my ghostly reflection in the dead screen, and tried to work out the implications of everything I'd learned today.

Could my father have put me forward as a suspect in the killing of Tom Neudecker to deflect suspicion away from himself? Surely he wouldn't take such a malign course of action…

Wouldn't he?

I accessed the computer, and before I knew what I was doing I had hacked into the central files. I went through my father's data bank, but came across nothing that I hadn't accessed before. I even broke into Suzanne's file, and was gratified to learn that there was nothing, not even in her personal diary, that might suggest that she had been seeing Tom Neudecker. Then it came to me that she would hardly put such sensitive information in her files, when she knew full well that I had the ability to hack into them. Such is the spectre of jealousy… I was plunged into fresh despair.

Next, I went through Tom Neudecker's files, trying to come up with

something, anything, that might lead me towards why someone had wanted him dead.

I went through everything I'd accessed the other day, reading his notes over and over in case I'd missed anything back then. It was laborious work, made all the more demanding because I was more than a little drunk.

Then I broke into his restricted, password-controlled files and found what must have been his personal diary, tucked away under the title of a file marked simply: *TN*.

It contained a lot of dates and reminders, and seemingly nothing of a personal nature. There were no heartfelt declarations of his love for Suzanne, which cheered me.

I scrolled down the page and came to a big, full-colour graphic.

Suzanne was sitting on a rock, smiling at the camera, against the backdrop of the trial site.

It was an innocent snap, of course, one of many Tom had been in the habit of taking for the frequent progress reports he put out. But, lodged as it was on his personal file, it did nothing but fan the fires of jealousy within me. Irrational, I know.

Then I found the memo.

It was entered under the date: 32nd Sixthmonth, the day before Tom Neudecker met his end.

Breakthrough! I sat up and read on:

I have almost proved, at least to my own satisfaction, that the trees are intelligent – sufficiently so to disqualify Terpsichore for colonisation under the Galactic Charter. This morning I discovered that the trees possess similar dendritic axons to those found in the anemones of Bellatrix IX, and they were granted protected status five years ago.

There followed a lot of research data that backed up his claim.

Then he had written: *Of course, it is early days yet. I won't make an announcement until I've discussed it with the team. Before that, I'll mention my findings to Brinkley and McGregor. I can only imagine how they might react…*

I sat back and stared at the screen, my heart thudding.

Christ, I thought. Was this another motive for my father to laser Tom Neudecker to death?

I killed the screen and lay on my bed in the darkness, my thoughts in turmoil. At one point I dozed off briefly, then came awake and instinctively reached out for Suzanne. She wasn't there, of course, and

her absence when I needed her most made me feel more isolated than ever.

I'd go see Brinkley in the morning, I told myself; try to find out if Neudecker had mentioned anything to him and my father. Then I would find Suzanne and apologise.

I was not due to start my shift until midday. As soon as I awoke I got through to Brinkley's office, spoke to his secretary and made an appointment to see him at nine. I said it was important, to do with the investigation of Tom Neudecker's murder. Brinkley is a busy man: he wouldn't normally have time to entertain lowly botanists like me.

A minute before nine I was kicking my heels in the lobby of his spacious dome, the largest in the settlement. Rank has its privileges. Brinkley was known to indulge himself in the many perks afforded by his lofty position: he was never to be seen without a stubby cigar, and he liked his imported brandy.

Not that I needed any reason to dislike him: he was the head of Technology, and a good friend of my father's.

He sat behind a big desk in his reclining chair. "Jon," he said with unaccustomed familiarity. "Take a seat. My secretary passed on your message."

I sat down. I had planned a story to cover my hacking into Tom Neudecker's com-files. "I saw Tom the day before he died," I lied. "He came to see me about a discovery he'd made..."

I paused there, expecting Brinkley to nod in his superior way and tell me that Tom had told him about his findings also. He merely watched me, non-committal, and repeated: "Discovery?"

So had Tom died before he'd had the chance to tell the Commander, or was Brinkley playing his cards close to his chest?

"He was pretty convinced that, technically, the trees are intelligent," I said, watching him closely. He showed not the slightest reaction.

I repeated Tom's findings in more detail, then added, "He said that he intended to tell you and my father. I was wondering this morning if he got the chance to do so, before... before what happened."

Brinkley leaned forward, aggressive. "Tom didn't say a damned word to me about anything like this," he said.

I hesitated, then asked, "My father didn't say anything to you about Tom Neudecker having told him, by any chance?"

Brinkley regarded me through the rising smoke. "Why don't you

ask your father that, Jon? As far as I'm concerned, this is the first I've heard about any rumoured intelligence…"

"It would have a bearing on Security's investigations," I began.

Brinkley glared at me. "I'm perfectly aware of the implications, thank you. Now, if that was all you have to tell me…"

A minute later I found myself outside the dome and staring up the hillside to the trial site. I made out Suzanne going about her business among the trees, and began rehearsing a suitable apology…

She was squatting beside a tree, and looked up from her softscreen as I approached. "Hi," she said, with marked coolness.

"Suzanne," I began. "What I said yesterday… I didn't mean to—"

She cut in: "What?" she snapped. "You didn't mean to accuse me of having an affair with Tom, or you didn't mean to accuse me of killing the poor sod?"

I gestured pathetically. "Both. I'm sorry. It's been tough lately, what with my father acting like the bastard he is…"

"Don't blame your dad for what you said, Jonathan, for God's sake. It was pretty damned cruel, if you really want to know. How long have we been together, now?"

I looked away.

"Long enough for you to have got to know me. I wasn't screwing Tom, and I didn't kill him."

"I know you didn't," I murmured. "Listen—" I looked around, ensuring we would not be overheard. "I've found out a few things since yesterday." I told her about my father taking me in for questioning last night, and then what I'd discovered in Tom's files.

She stared at me. "Your father thought *you'd* done it?" she said, incredulous.

"He said maybe I was jealous of Tom," I said. "I think he'd been talking to Ananda."

"But even so, to accuse his own son…"

"Why not, if it would take the heat off himself for the time being?" Even as I said this, I had to remind myself that I was talking about my father.

"You think he might have killed Tom?"

"Christ, I don't know. He had the motive – motives, plural – if Tom had told him about his findings." I told Suzanne about my meeting with Brinkley that morning.

She just shook her head, then returned to her softscreen and left me to my thoughts.

I spent the afternoon in the trial site, working side by side with Suzanne. I went through phases of thinking that we were gripped by irrational paranoia, and then sudden, frightening periods of considering *what if...*?

Towards sunset, Suzanne said, "I've been thinking, Jon."

I smiled at her. "Go on."

She looked around the trial site. "You remember the twelfth tree, the one that went missing after Tom's death?"

I stowed my softscreen in my buggy and shrugged. "What about it?"

"Do you think it might help our investigations if we tracked down the tree, ran a few tests?"

"I don't see..."

She shrugged. "Maybe the tree was frightened into fleeing by what it sensed in the trial site when Tom was killed. Maybe if we conducted some aversion stimuli tests—"

"Along the lines of those we did with the predators?" I nodded. "It's a long shot."

"You willing to give it a go?"

"Why not? I have a free day tomorrow."

"We'll take a walk into the hills, Jon. The tree can't have got that far, can it?"

I followed Suzanne through the trial site, tracing the route we thought the fleeing tree would most likely have taken. She dropped to one knee and traced the loose soil with her fingertips.

"Here, Jon," she called out. "Look."

I knelt beside her. Sure enough, in the sandy soil, between threadbare patches of grass, I made out a series of faint striations.

"The tree came this way, I think," Suzanne said. She looked up, staring up the hillside. "Trouble is, it's rocky up there. We'll have difficulty following its trail."

"Let's take it slowly," I suggested, more out of regard for my lack of fitness. Whereas I use the buggy on every possible occasion, Suzanne is an outdoors girl and would think nothing of a ten kilometre hike before lunch.

We climbed. We left the trial site in our wake and made our way through the scree of the foothills. From time to time Suzanne bent to examine the ground.

"See anything?"

"Faint traces. It definitely came this way."

I imagined the tree, sentient or otherwise, fleeing the scene of the murder and taking refuge in the foothills. There was something at once sad and awesome about the notion.

After fifteen minutes I called a halt. Suzanne was way ahead, bounding over rocks like a mountain goat. She paused from the vantage point of an outcropping of rock, hands on hips, and smiled down at me indulgently.

"Let's take a breather!" I pleaded.

"It's the gym for you when we get back!" she laughed.

We sat on the rock and stared down the hillside. I was surprised and gratified by how high we had climbed. Hundreds of feet below us, the agglomeration of silvered domes that comprised our fledgling settlement were reduced to the size of soap bubbles, iridescent in the sun.

Beyond the settlement was the long curve of the coastline and, opposite the headland where Alan had his cabin, the point where the continental mainland almost touched our island. At low tide the two landmasses were connected by a narrow, seaweed-slick isthmus.

"It's beautiful," Suzanne murmured.

"I wonder what this place will look like in a hundred years from now?"

"Don't even say that. You know, sometimes I wonder what we're doing out here, whether what we're doing is right."

"If we stick by the charter..." I began.

"Sometimes, Jonathan, you're so naïve. Do you really think that the charter will be respected in twenty years from now, or fifty or a hundred? It's just so many words the Government have cobbled together to appease us ecologists. A hundred years from now, they'll tear up the charter, if it's politically expedient, and allow colonisation wherever they damned well like."

I looked at Suzanne. She had never expressed these views before, and I wondered at the woman I thought I knew.

"Why so cynical?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Perhaps I've been watching things

a little more closely since Tom's death, seen all the manoeuvring. Everything's political, isn't it, Jon?"

And before I could reply, she stood and strode off.

I followed.

For the next hour we climbed steadily, my legs and lungs protesting in equal measure. At one point I asked, "Do you really think the damned tree came all this way?"

She frowned at the way we had come. "Well, I was pretty certain it had a few hundred metres back. I seem to have lost the trail. Let's go back and retrace the route—"

"Wait," I said. "What's that?"

A hundred metres ahead, in a cutting between the hills, was a grassy dell or glade. I could just make out the waving fronds of what might have been our fugitive tree.

Suzanne gave me a radiant smile. "Let's go!"

We hurried over the rocks towards the cutting, then stopped and stared.

"An embarrassment of riches," Suzanne murmured to herself.

Instead of finding just one tree in the glade, we were confronted with perhaps fifty stately wildwoods, swaying in the warm breeze.

"Find your alien witness amongst that lot," I said.

She shrugged. "We'll just have to conduct tests on all of them," she said, "However long that might take... Hold on, what's that?"

Before I could question her, she skipped off down the incline. She stopped before a tall, swaying tree to the right of the glade and frantically waved at me to join her.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Shh," she said. "We don't want to frighten it away again!"

And she pointed at the trunk of the tree.

A diagonal scar, perhaps a metre long, cut through the bark of the trunk to reveal the wood beneath, singed by the killer's laser.

I turned to Suzanne. She backed off and waved me over. "No wonder the poor thing fled," she said in a low voice. "Whoever killed Tom hit the tree as well."

I looked back at the injured wildwood. "So what now?"

She was thoughtful for a while, then looked at me. "Now," she said, "I prove to you that I didn't kill Tom Neudecker, okay?"

"Suzanne..." I began, but she was already approaching the wildwood.

She reached out, touched its scarred bark with her fingertips. Then she opened her arms and embraced the trunk.

After ten seconds, she stood back and looked up at its glimmering leaves. She called out: "Show him that I'm innocent, wildwood! Show Jonathan that you're not frightened of me!"

I stared as the tree lowered a branch and caressed Suzanne's shoulder with its leaves.

She turned to me, defiant. "Now do you believe me, Jon?"

"Suzanne," I began. "I'm sorry..."

She went on, staring at me, "Now we return to the settlement and collect test data. Pheromones of our main suspect. Items of clothing. Maybe even recordings of his voice. We don't really know how the trees recognise danger, but it might be one of these stimuli."

"I can download samples my father's voice from the com network," I said. "As for pheromones..."

"We'll think of something, Jon. Come on, let's get back."

We set off, the going considerably easier as we were walking downhill now and had our destination in sight. We arrived back at the settlement perhaps an hour later. I felt, for the first time in a long while, that we were getting somewhere with the investigation.

My good mood didn't last too long, however. A Security buggy drew up behind us and my father jumped out. He confronted us, chest puffed out, looking for all the world like a biped toad. Two red-uniformed goons lurked behind him, ominously.

"We've been looking all over the damned settlement for you!" he said. "Where the hell have you been?"

I glanced at Suzanne: she looked frightened.

My father addressed her, "Suzanne, if you'd care to accompany my men to the security dome..."

She squared up to him, bravely. "And if I don't?"

"Then I'll have no option but to place you under arrest."

"What?" I began.

"It's okay, Jon," Suzanne said, smiling at me. "I'll go with them and answer whatever stupid questions they ask me."

She climbed into the buggy, sitting between the two guards.

I faced my father. "Arrest her?" I echoed.

He took my elbow and pulled me off to one side. "Look, son, I don't like this one damned bit. But I have to do my duty, yes?"

"But Suzanne—" I started.

He had the good grace to looked pained. "Jonathan… I don't know how to say this, but we have a witness. Someone says they saw Suzanne and Tom the other day. They heard Suzanne cry out, and saw her fire a laser at Tom. I'm sorry."

He left me standing there and hurried back to the buggy. I watched, dazed with disbelief, as it started up and drove away at speed, taking Suzanne into custody.

An hour later, back at the dome, I picked up my personal com and tried to get through to Suzanne. Instead, the voice that answered was my father's.

"Jon, what do you want?"

"Where's Suzanne? I need to talk to her."

"That's impossible, son. She's under arrest. I'm sorry. We're holding her for at least another day—"

"You can't possibly think…" I began.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, and cut the connection.

I tried to sleep, but only dozed fitfully. I awoke again and again, images of Tom Neudecker's remains playing in my head.

I awoke at four, still fully dressed, and something occurred to me. I thought of the tree we had found in the foothills, and Suzanne's talk of testing it…

I ran into the kitchen, found a carver, and quit my dome. I drove through the settlement until I was within fifty metres of the security domes, then cut the engine and walked the rest of the way.

It was almost dawn, and warm. The cerise light of the rising sun showed as a bright filament on the seaward horizon. There was no one about, and in the eerie pre-dawn silence I felt like a criminal as I crept towards the security domes and peered through the viewports.

Suzanne was in the second dome I checked. She was sitting on a bunk, hugging herself and looking forlorn. I tapped on the viewport and she looked up suddenly, an expression of surprise crossing her features.

She jumped up and hurried over to the screen. Her lips moved, but her words failed to reach me.

I gestured with the cutter and indicated that she should stand back.

Then I applied the electric blade to the thin polymer skin of the dome and created an arched, mouse-hole shaped opening at knee height.

Seconds later I was hauling Suzanne through the gap.

"Jon, for chrissake!"

I grabbed her hand and hurried her away from the dome.

"Where the hell are we going?" Panic sounded in her voice. "I mean, how far can we run?"

"Far enough to learn the truth. Get in." We had reached the buggy. She swung into the passenger seat and I gunned the engine, drove us out of the quiet settlement and into the foothills.

We passed the trial site and climbed the open land, following the route Suzanne and I had taken yesterday. The going was rough, but the buggy handled the terrain without a problem. Fifteen minutes later the rising sun was on my back, warming me.

"Jon, will you please tell me what's going on?"

Instead of answering her, I pulled out my com. I had given this part of the plan much thought and knew how to get my father to the glade where the injured tree now grew.

An angry voice answered my call. "Hello? McGregor, here."

"Dad, this is Jon."

"Where's Suzanne, son? Don't try to deny that—"

I interrupted. "She's up here, with me. I don't know what the hell I was thinking about. I thought we might lay low, buy time till you discovered who'd killed Tom."

"So you're turning yourselves in?"

I glanced across at Suzanne, who was frowning at me. "Well... I would, except she's no longer here. She ran off."

He took the bait. "Where are you?"

I gave him our co-ordinates.

"Okay, I'm on my way." He cut the connection.

We had reached the crest of the hill overlooking the glade. I cut the engine and we climbed from the buggy. The leaves of the wildwoods glinted in the light of the rising sun.

I took Suzanne's hand and we walked down the incline.

"What now?" she asked.

"Now," I said, "we wait."

Ten minutes later the sound of an engine eddied up the hillside.

"Quick," I said, taking her hand. "This way."

Instead of returning to the buggy, I hurried Suzanne up the side of the glade and into the cover of an outcropping of jagged rock. From

this vantage we had a perfect view of the glade and the approaching buggy. I felt at once sick and elated as I watched the vehicle slew to a halt beside mine. My father and Brinkley jumped out, looked into my buggy, then stared around in puzzlement.

Seconds later they set off down the slope and into the glade. I found a loose rock and tossed it down the incline. It skittered over more rock, creating a loud clatter.

My father called out, "Jon? What the hell is all this about?" His voice carried across the glade, echoing. "Where are you?"

I was aware of my heart, thudding slowly.

The injured tree responded. I fully expected it to take flight, disengage its rootstock and flee...

It responded, but not quite as I envisaged.

Slowly, almost gracefully, the wildwood lowered a frond and caressed my father's shoulder. Alarmed, not realising the significance of the tree's benediction, my father stepped away from it.

I experienced, then, a sudden light-headed sensation. I was fully expecting the wildwood to incriminate my father, reveal him for the murderer I knew he was... My first reaction was a kind of shock at his innocence, followed by the realisation that the killer was still out there, somewhere.

Suzanne stared at me, took my hand and squeezed.

I stood, showing myself, and scrambled over the scree towards my father. He turned, surprised at my sudden appearance. Behind me, Suzanne followed.

My father stared at her, then snapped, "What the hell? I thought you said...?"

Before I could reply, we were distracted by a noise from across the glade.

We turned and stared. One by one, the wildwoods were uprooting themselves. As we watched, they shrugged the encumbering clods of earth from their root systems and shambled down the incline.

Brinkley pointed. "Look..."

We turned. On the heights above us, in the mountain valleys sloping to the foothills, we made out hundreds of mobile wildwoods. There was something at once awesome and yet almost absurd in their procession down the hillside.

"They're migrating," Suzanne said in a whisper. "My God, Alan was right. They do migrate en masse."

I said, "Perhaps they aren't migrating, Suzanne. Perhaps they're fleeing."

My father looked at me. "Fleeing what?"

I shrugged. "Us humans, maybe."

While the others watched the slow progress of the trees, I pulled out my com and got through to Alan Wiseman.

He was slow to reply. Around us, the trees in the glade were beginning to uproot themselves. The ground shook, and the rending sound of torn soil filled the air.

"Hello?" Alan said.

"Alan," I called above the din. "You've got to get up here. The trees are migrating—"

I turned up the volume, and his voice rang out around the glade. "Where are you, Jon? The trees migrating? Are you sure?"

Suzanne's scream froze us all. "Oh, my God," she said. "Look!"

The scarred tree had reacted. I looked around, but the trees to its immediate left and right had yet to join the migration.

Something else had impelled the tree to take flight.

The sound of Alan's voice...

Its fronds stood upright as if in shock, and as we watched it began the process of hauling itself from the ground. Its root system, freed from constraint, thrashed the air.

The others hurried towards the buggies, but I could only stand and stare at the com in my hand as Alan Wiseman's voice rang out, "Jon, what's happening? Can you hear me, Jon?"

The following day I drove from the settlement and through the coastal meadows to Alan Wiseman's homestead. I was not alone: following in a second buggy was my father, along to make the arrest.

Already, the process of dismantling the settlement was under way. Director Brinkley strode around like the jumped-up General he was, directing operations. Soon, the star-transporters would arrive on Terpsichore Three, and the evacuation of the planet would begin. Soon, the trees would be left in peace.

I braked on the track some way from Alan's cabin, jumped from the cab and moved to my father's buggy.

He was standing beside the vehicle, wondering why I had halted here.

"Give me a few minutes, okay?" I said. "I'd like to talk to Alan alone."

He hesitated, then nodded. Was it too early to say whether, since the events in the glade, my father's attitude towards me had softened?

"Of course," he said. "But don't take too long, okay?"

"One thing," I went on. "The person who said they'd seen Susanne talking to Tom that morning... It was Alan, wasn't it?"

I could see the pain in his eyes as he nodded.

I turned and walked towards the cabin.

Alan's buggy was parked outside. I stopped and peered in through the side window. The rear seat was piled with provisions, foodstuffs and water canisters.

I walked around the back of the cabin. Alan was standing in his garden, staring out across the isthmus as, in a long queue, the wildwoods slowly made their way towards the mainland. I thought I saw him dash a tear from his cheek as he turned and smiled.

"Jon, good to see you. Care for a drink?"

I joined him on his home-made bench, filled with a strange mixture of emotions. I had always considered Alan a quiet, caring man, full of wisdom and compassion. But he had killed Tom Neudecker, and tried to implicate Susanne...

We talked about the evacuation of the planet, and something cruel in me delighted in his discomfort.

I had considered this meeting ever since telling my father that I suspected Alan Wiseman was the murderer: I had fully intended to tell Alan that I knew what he had done, and why. But now, when the time came, I was unable to find the words to accuse my one-time friend.

Instead I said, "I noticed the buggy."

He looked at me, alarmed. "I can't leave the planet, Jon. Terpsichore means so much to me. You don't know how much."

I nodded. It had meant so much to him that he had killed a man in order to remain here.

"You won't say anything, will you?" he asked, almost pleading.

Unable to meet his gaze, I shook my head.

He went on, "I'll take off, head into the interior of the mainland. There's so much study to be done on the native flora and fauna." His gaze lost its focus as he stared off into a future which, I knew, would never come about.

Ridiculous, I know, but a part of me – the part that had liked and respected Alan Wiseman – felt almost guilty in the role I was playing in his arrest.

As I was about to take my leave, I said, "About Tom Neudecker. You don't have any ideas, suspicions as to who…?"

I suppose I wanted him to come clean, and admit what he had done. But of course he said nothing.

Instead he matched my gaze, and then shook his head. And any respect I might have felt for Alan Wiseman died, then.

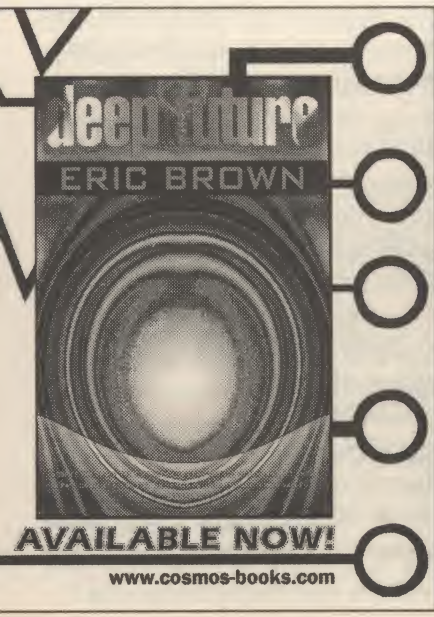
I shook his hand, said farewell, and left the homestead.

I returned to the buggies and nodded to my father. "He's all yours."

He touched my shoulder, almost paternally, and walked towards the cabin. Quickly, I climbed into my buggy and started the engine.

As I drove back to the settlement and Suzanne, anticipating the imminent evacuation and our next posting among the stars, I considered Alan's future in some jail back on Earth, and the fact that his incarceration would not be punishment in itself.

His punishment, of course, would be that he'd be forever denied the freedom of Terpsichore Three. ●



The Archive

Introduction

These pages list material of interest to SF readers. Please send items to the address on page 2. While I will endeavour to include as many items as possible, a listing here cannot be guaranteed.

New Hardback Novels

Ray Bradbury - From the Dust Returned
(Earthlight; 2001; Hdbk; 204 pp.; ISBN 0-7432-0759-9; £16.99)

This book is described in the accompanying press release as 'Ray Bradbury's first genre for almost 20 years'. I presume this means his first SF or fantasy novel. Whatever, this book, perhaps more an extended prose poem, is a welcome arrival. It tells of the fantastical and spectral Elliott family (Grandmère is an undead Egyptian mummy, Uncle Einar has wings and flies at night, etc.) who take possession of a house in Illinois. As you would expect from its origin as half-a-dozen or so short stories it is episodic in nature. (I note that *From the Dust Returned*, *F&SF*, September 1994, isn't acknowledged although a handful of others are.) This, though, combined with Bradbury's prose, makes it ideal for dipping into – preferably around Halloween, and I recommend it to you.

It is well designed too, with a number of small decorative illustrations, and an afterword by the author.

Terry Brooks - Antrax
(Earthlight; 2001; Hdbk; 375 pp.; ISBN 0-7432-0953-2; £17.99)

Book two of the 'The Voyage of the Jerle Shannara' fantasy series.

Robin Cook - Shock
(Macmillan; 2001; Hdbk; 342 pp.; ISBN 0-333-90280-7; £10)

Near-future medical thriller. Aggressively priced.

Cecilia Dart-Thornton - The Ill-Made Mute
(Macmillan; 2001; Hdbk; 437 pp.; ISBN 0-333-90753-1; £17.99)

First book in 'The Bitterbynde' fantasy trilogy. Also received shortly afterward was a C-pbk edition (ISBN 0-333-90754-X, £9.99) which has a number of positive review quotes (including ones from *F&SF* and *SF Chronicle*).

David Gemmell - Drenai Tales Volume One
(Orbit; 2001; Hdbk; 759 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-131-4; £20)

Omnibus volume of three 'Drenai' novels from 1985-86: ***Legend***, ***The King Beyond the Gate*** and ***Waylander***.

Terry Goodkind - Debt of Bones
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 119 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07256-3; £12.99)

This is a revision of a novella that originally appeared in Robert Silverberg's fantasy anthology ***Legends*** in 1998, and it can also be found in David Hartwell's ***The Year's Best Fantasy*** (see later).

Set in the world of his 'The Sword of Truth' series, it tells of a woman, Abby, whose husband and daughter are held hostage. She is then forced to help entrap Zedd, The First Wizard. For the first half this is fairly good stuff, I suppose (if you turn a blind eye to the somewhat clumsy prose and standard fantasy furniture), but it goes downhill rapidly towards the end. Without going into details, the threat turns out not to be a threat, and the characters spend the last ten pages explaining to each other what has *really* happened. My impression was of a work in need of some serious editing. However, given Goodkind's bestseller status, I suspect he doesn't suffer that sort of treatment from his publishers anymore.

Finally, there's a somewhat breathless introduction by the author and half-a-dozen or so rather amateurish internal illustrations. Hard to believe the latter come from Keith Parkinson, the cover artist.

Terry Goodkind - The Pillars of Creation
(Gollancz; 2002; Hdbk; 557 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07161-3; £17.99)

Fantasy novel.

Graham Joyce - Smoking Poppy
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 227 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07229-6; £12.99)

New dark fantasy novel set in Thailand, and one for my 'to be read' pile.

Sally Spedding - Wringland
(Macmillan; 2001; Hdbk; 548 pp.; ISBN 0-333-90566-0; £16.99)

Horror novel set in rural England.

New Paperback Novels

Neal Asher - The Skinner
(Macmillan; 2002; C-pbk; 474 pp.; ISBN 0-333-90364-1; £9.99)

Uncorrected proof copy received of this writer's second full-length

novel. This, after an awkward opening chapter or two, rapidly becomes an engrossing, colourful and inventive story for the first two-thirds or so. Based on the watery planet Spatterjay, where a virus has given the locals virtual immortality, it tells of a number of individuals – and groups – who converge on a monstrous being known as The Skinner with conflicting aims. There's the Polity Monitor, Sable Keech, who is a reification (walking dead man, in effect) looking for vengeance; Erlin, who is looking for Ambel, an ancient sea Captain and her former lover; Janer, the eyes and ears of an off-world hornet hive-mind; the viscous alien Prador, and so on. Other elements of note include an ecosystem full of creatures that voraciously consume each other throughout (this is repeatedly described in graphic detail), the living sails (who appear to be on the verge of sentience) that the Captains use on their ships, a good (if derivative) line in smart-alecky robot-drones working for the AI planetary Warden… you get the idea.

On the debit side, this novel tails off somewhat towards the end. I couldn't work out if this reaction was due to my (perhaps, by now, well-known) antipathy for overlong novels or whether matters aren't wrapped up quickly enough. Certainly, there is too much description at the end of the book, and some other unnecessary exposition. Maybe less could have happened on-stage. Perhaps, having set up so many different narrative threads, at the end it was difficult to draw them all together economically.

Worth a look though, especially if you enjoyed his story in this issue.

Richard Calder - Impakto

(Earthlight; 2001; A-pbk; 442 pp.; ISBN 0-7434-0895-0; £6.99)

Dark, offbeat fantasy. Part of this (the first section?) appeared as a similarly titled novelette in *Interzone*.

Orson Scott Card - Shadow of the Hegemon

(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 444 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-066-0; £6.99)

Book two of 'The Shadow Saga', and sixth of the 'Ender' books. I can remember reading the superior novelette that started this series off: *Ender's Game* (*Analog*, August 1977)…

Mark Chadbourn - Always Forever

(Gollancz; 2001; C-pbk; 451 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07254-7; £10.99)

Fantasy novel. Book three of 'The Age of Misrule'.

Mark Chadbourn - Darkest Hour

(Gollancz; 2001; A-pbk; 467 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-766-7; £6.99)

Fantasy novel. Book two of 'The Age of Misrule'.

David Feintuch - Children of Hope
(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 650 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-070-9; £6.99)

On casual examination, this seventh entry in 'The Seafort Saga' seems to be a naval story translated into a space opera. However, Feintuch is the 1996 winner of the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer. This is not always a guarantee of quality, but I suspect it makes him worth closer examination when I have the time.

Julia Gray - The Crystal Desert
(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 566 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-093-8; £6.99)

Fantasy novel. Book three of 'The Guardian Cycle'.

Laurell K. Hamilton - Obsidian Butterfly
(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 596 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-132-2; £6.99)

Ninth (?) of the ten 'Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter' novels.

Ray Hammond - Emergence
(Macmillan; 2001; A-pbk; 597 pp.; ISBN 0-330-48595-4; £6.99)

This first novel, from a lecturer and writer on future trends, is a futuristic thriller that is being marketed as a mainstream title.

Harry Harrison - The Stainless Steel Rat Joins the Circus
(Gollancz; 2001; A-pbk; 269 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-724-1; £6.99)

It occurred to me recently that Harrison's SF tends to fall into four groups. First there is his action-adventure or traditional SF: ***The Gods Themselves Throw Incense***, The 'Deathworld' trilogy, the 'Eden' trilogy, etc. Secondly, we have the more serious, sometimes overtly political work: ***The Defensive Bomber***, ***Make Room! Make Room!*** Third is his humour, ***Bill, the Galactic Hero***, ***Star Smashers of the Galaxy Rangers***, ***A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah!*** Finally we have the category that this novel fits into, which is light adventure. This, perhaps, is the only segment of Harrison's fiction that does not appeal. Certainly the first couple of 'Stainless Steel Rat' novels didn't grab me, although I haven't read this one. It's maybe time to try another…

Marcus Herniman - The Treason of Dortrean
(Earthlight; 2001; A-pbk; 479 pp.; ISBN 0-7434-1513-2; £5.99)

Fantasy. Book two of 'The Arrandin Trilogy'.

Ian Irvine - The Way Between the Worlds
(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 635 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-073-3; £7.99)

Fantasy novel. Volume four of 'The View From the Mirror' quartet.

Kate Jacoby - Rebel's Cage
(Gollancz; 2001; C-pbk; 392 pp.; ISBN 0-575-06887-6; £10.99)

Fantasy novel. 'Fourth Book of Elita'.

K. W. Jeter - Blade Runner 4: Eye of the Talon
(Gollancz; 2001; A-pbk; 236 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-867-1; £6.99)

SF franchise novel but, given the writer, hopefully better than usual.

Gwyneth Jones - Bold as Love
(Gollancz; 2001; C-pbk; 308 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07031-5; £10.99)

The prologue of this rock & roll revolution fantasy appeared in a recent *Interzone*. Note that this novel concludes with 'End of Part One. The story continues in *Castles Made of Sand*.'

Ursula K. Le Guin - The Telling
(Gollancz; 2001; C-pbk; 264 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07258-X; £9.99)

A new novel in Le Guin's popular 'Hainish' cycle. The book uses large type and twenty-four lines per page to pad out a work of 65,000 words or so. What would once have been a typical length for a novel... Nice to see some writers working to the length their muse and not the marketplace dictates.

Ken MacLeod - Cosmonaut Keep
(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 385 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-067-9; £6.99)

Ken MacLeod is a writer whom I have intended to read for some time now, but there has always been some reason not to: some of his previous novels are semi-linked, so which to read first? Once that was resolved, the obvious choice was not available in the handful of stores I went to. And so on. Now several items have landed on my desk almost simultaneously: there is this novel, the first in a trilogy; *Dark Light*, the second volume in hardback; and a new novella from PS Publishing, *The Human Front*. I hope to cover both these latter items next issue, but begin with this novel.

My first impression is that this is very much a work of two halves. Not only are there are two main narrative threads, but they vary in their success. The first thread concerns the events that unfold around Matt, a hacker in an early 21st-century independent Scotland. To the south is an England that (if I remember correctly) is part of a greater, and communist, Russian empire. If my memory is vague here, it is because this world doesn't really convince, and hence the details tended not to 'stick'. Not only is the idea of a huge, communist Russian empire at odds with what happened in reality, but I wasn't convinced by the idea of this type of political structure lasting into a technologically more complex tomorrow. I believe I read elsewhere that this future derives from alternate world ideas that MacLeod has played with in earlier books. If this is the case, I can only ask why are they also used here?

The rest of the book doesn't really need this alternate world thread to set it up; worse, it runs the risk of over-egging the pudding in a book with more than enough in it already.

The plot in this part of the book involves Matt on the run with an attractive American agent, before ending up on a space station that, ultimately, develops a space-drive from schematics beamed to Earth by enigmatic aliens. All of this eventually links up to the second part of the book, which is set on a planet called Mingulay, settled by the descendants of the cosmonauts who built the spacecraft in the first thread. The planet is also populated by the saurs, a reptilian race, and the sea-dwelling kraken, who do double duty as starship pilots. Indeed, the rest of the 'local' area has been settled by humans who have been transported there by these kraken starship-drivers, but Mingulay is peculiar in that humanity got there by themselves, courtesy of the cosmonaut-developed craft...

This second thread has a three main characters: Gregor Cairns, a descendant of one of the original cosmonauts (who, by the way, being immortal, pop up again towards the end of the book), Elizabeth Harkness, who works with Cairns and has an unrequited love for him, and their saur companion, Salasso. They all work at a marine institute until a pivotal point in the narrative where they all troop off in search of the original cosmonauts, to rediscover the secret of starship navigation and immortality.

By now, you are probably getting the idea that there is too much going on in this book, and I would have to agree. One of the things that I disliked is the clutter, the other a lack of clarity in certain parts (trying to keep track of the multiple characters and motivations on the spaceship developing the stardrive in the first thread is hard work).

On the plus side, however, it is a fairly entertaining read: the sequences on Mingulay have a real sense of place and the characters are clearly drawn. Despite all the reservations above, I'm looking forward to the second volume, where I hope I find a more clearly focused story.

Will McCarthy - The Collapsium

(Gollancz; 2001; A-pbk; 325 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-326-2; £6.99)

SF novel.

Juliet E. McKenna - The Warrior's Bond

(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 520 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-065-2; £6.99)

Fantasy novel. Fourth of 'The Tales of Einarinn'.

Stan Nicholls - Warriors of the Tempest
(Gollancz; 2001; A-pbk; 280 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-562-1; £5.99)
Fantasy novel. Book three of 'Orcs: First Blood'.

Robert Reed - Marrow
(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 502 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-078-4; £6.99)
The welcome debut of this writer in the UK is with a novel first released in the USA last year. A portion of it, the novella *Marrow*, has previously appeared in the late *SF Age* (July 1997). On my 'to read' list.

Matthew Reilly - Area 7
(Macmillan; 2001; C-pbk; 485 pp.; ISBN 0-333-90625-X; £10.99)
This (borderline SF?) thriller is a sequel to *Ice Station*.

Matthew Reilly - Contest
(Macmillan; 2001; A-pbk; 488 pp.; ISBN 0-330-48995-X; £5.99)
Thriller about seven people going into New York State Library on one special night, and only one of them coming out...

Martin Scott - Thraxas and the Sorcerors
(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 266 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-077-6; £5.99)
Humorous fantasy. Fifth (?) of the six 'Thraxas' novels.

Ian Stewart & Jack Cohen - Wheelers
(Earthlight; 2001; C-pbk; 505 pp.; ISBN 0-7432-0743-2; £10)
Solar system space opera from two scientists.

Freda Warrington - The Obsidian Tower
(Earthlight; 2001; A-pbk; 708 pp.; ISBN 0-7434-1607-4; £6.99)
Fantasy. Conclusion to 'The Jewelfire Trilogy'.

Reprint Hardback Novels

Alfred Bester - The Stars My Destination
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 258 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07337-3; £14.99)
A must-buy novel from my top five list. This dazzling, fast-paced and inventive novel was way ahead of its time when serialised in *Galaxy* (1955). It was a great read when I first got it in the seventies (I believe that Penguin copy had the variant, and my preferred, title *Tiger! Tiger!)* and was *still* excellent on rereading a few years ago.

If you haven't read this novel of the antihero Gully Foyle, and his quest for vengeance in a strange, futuristic world where teleportation has caused major social change, you have a major treat in store! #4 in the SF Masterworks series.

Arthur C. Clarke - Childhood's End
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 200 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07263-6; £14.99)

This 1954 novel tells of the arrival of the alien Overlords on Earth and their partial control of humankind, which eventually evolves into a new kind of being. Quite good ending, but some routine parts on the way there. I first read this one a couple of years ago; it'll probably evoke more laudatory responses from those who read it twenty or thirty years back. #6 in the SF Masterworks series.

Philip K. Dick - The Man in the High Castle
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 249 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07335-7; £14.99)

Another edition of this excellent 1962 Hugo-award winning novel, which takes place in an alternate-world where both the Germans and Japanese have occupied America after it has lost the Second World War. The cover for this hardback edition is a little disappointing, though. It's good enough generic SF, but seems to have little connection with the contents. Compare this with the artwork for the recent Penguin edition for instance (which I recently found out was suggested by Eric Brown). #3 in the SF Masterworks series.

Joe Haldeman - The Forever War
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 254 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07318-7; £14.99)

This is one classic I managed to 'discover' myself while working part-time at a superstore in the mid-70s. After lunch I used to go up onto the shop floor and browse the SF books. One weekend this novel appeared as an Orbit paperback original: bright orange spine and battling space ships on the cover. The nonchalant cynicism of the first short chapter quickly hooked me, and I made one of my best buys of the 70s. It turned out to be an engrossing anti-war novel about a UN Expeditionary Force travelling through wormholes to fight an alien race. As the wormhole jumps are complicated by relativistic effects the war spreads over hundreds of years…

This novel originally appeared as a series of four stories in ***Analog*** under Ben Bova's editorship. I can only guess at what that magazine's readership thought of this work: the attitudes, language and behaviour were such a sea-change from what John Campbell had previously presented. Haldeman mentions in the introduction that the novel had more 'adult language and situations', so it may be that the original series of stories (***Hero***, ***We Are Very Happy Here***, ***The Best of All Possible Worlds*** and ***End Game***; ***Analog***, June 1972, November 1973, November 1974 & January 1975) were toned down somewhat for magazine

publication. He also notes that the original version of the second and central section *We Are Very Happy Here* (*You Can Never Go Back*, *Amazing* 1975), which was rejected by Bova for being too bleak and dark, has been reinstated in this version.

Another one for your must-buy list. #9 in the SF Masterworks series.

The Harvard Lampoon - Bored of the Rings
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 228 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07362-4; £6.99)

Pocketsize hardback parody of *Lord of the Rings* by *The Harvard Lampoon* magazine from 1969. 'Not a Major Film!'

Robert Heinlein - The Moon is a Harsh Mistress
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 382 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07336-5; £14.99)

There has always been a gap in my reading where this writer is concerned (although early consumption included both *Glory Road* and *Double Star*, which I enjoyed, I stalled out halfway through *Stranger in a Strange Land*). I believe this is one of his better novels and, therefore, is on my 'to read' list – it should be on yours, too.

Frank Herbert - Dune
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 447 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07334-9; £14.99)

Hardback edition of the Hugo and Nebula award-winning classic which was originally serialised as two novels in *Analog* (*Dune World*, December 1963-February 1964; *The Prophet of Dune*, January-May, 1965). It's been fifteen years or so since I read this but I thought it was quite a good novel, albeit a little heavy going in places. The story revolves around politics, intrigue and ecology on the desert planet of Arrakis, with its Bedouin-like Fremen, and the giant sandworms that inhabit the planet's desert. Matters develop with the arrival of young Paul Atreides, who may be a prophesied messiah. Time for a reread, I think.

I should also mention that this is the first of ten great-looking hardback editions of the SF Masterworks series received so far. As with the B-format paperback editions, the cover artwork is impressive, even more so on these smart, white dustcovers than on the paperback. I'm not sure whether the art is the same as the paperback edition, but this one has a marvellous John Schoenherr showing a gigantic sandworm bursting out of the desert, maw gaping, with the Fremen in the foreground. The only minor caveat I have is that the interior text, like the paperback editions, seems to have be have been scanned from previous editions rather than reset. Pity, but these editions will prove very popular buys nonetheless, I suspect.

Ursula Le Guin - The Left Hand of Darkness
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 248 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07219-9; £14.99)

This is one of Le Guin's 'Hanish' novels; it tells of an envoy to the planet Winter and of the intrigue between its hermaphrodite citizens. While I liked this well enough, and suggest that it is worth your time (it is a Hugo and Nebula winner after all), I can't rave about it like the Bester, Dick or Miller. Perhaps by the time I eventually got around to this book, the sexual and cultural themes were less resonant for me than they would have been for late-1960s and early-70s readers.

Walter M. Miller - A Canticle for Leibowitz
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 356 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07220-2; £14.99)

Classic, Hugo award-winning novel from 1960 based on a trilogy of stories originally published in *F&SF* (*A Canticle for Leibowitz*, April 1955; *And the Light is Risen*, August 1956; *The Last Canticle*, 1957).

The novel tells of an order of monks who seek and preserve knowledge after a nuclear holocaust, and humanity's slow climb back to a scientific-industrial society. You can't have too many Walter M. Miller books, so don't miss it. #5 in the SF Masterworks series.

Larry Niven - Ringworld
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 288 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07339-X; £14.99)

I read this 1970 Hugo award-winning novel years ago, but my memories of it are dim, so I'll list it here without further comment.

John Wyndham - The Day of the Triffids
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 272 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07338-1; £14.99)

This 1951 novel is a good, readable disaster story about Triffids, mobile plants which start attacking humanity and the (working from memory, probably decent, middle class, white) response. Now that I've started reading my way through John Christopher's oeuvre, I must pick up another couple of Wyndham's to see how they compare (other than the fact that I seem to like both). #10 in the SF Masterworks series.

Reprint Paperback Novels

Chris Bunch & Alan Cole - Sten 8: Empire's End
(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 522 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-083-0; £6.99)

Last novel in this space opera series.

John Christopher - A Wrinkle in the Skin
(Cosmos Books: 2000; 254 pp.; C-pbk; ISBN 1-58715-235-5; $15)

Those of you who enjoyed John Christopher's recent serial in these

pages could do a lot worse than to track down a copy of this 1965 disaster novel, recently reissued by Cosmos Books (c/o Wildside Books, PO Box 45, Gillette, NJ 07933-0045, USA; www.wildsidepress.com).

The catastrophe is a huge worldwide earthquake that causes unbelievable destruction and other secondary events. The main character is Matthew Cotter, a forty-something (I presume) divorced man who owns his own tomato-growing business on the island of Guernsey. The story, after a minimal amount of civilization-breaking-down-into-tribes at the very start (you sense the writer has done this kind of thing before and has other fish to fry), concerns his journey, along with Billy, a boy he saves, across the now nonexistent English channel to find Jane, a favourite daughter.

The journey across the dried-up seabed is one of several highlights in this book; the scenes described are vivid and interesting, especially so for those who live in this part of Britain, I would think. One part of the voyage across the Channel has them come across a beached supertanker still manned by its crazed captain – shades of J. G. Ballard. It would be interesting to find out if there was any influence either way here.

Other strengths are the characterisation and the unwavering clarity with which Christopher presents humanity's likely brutality and stupidity in these circumstances (some might say jaundiced, but it strikes me as spot on the money). Perhaps the best part of the entire book is the powerful epiphany that Cotter has at the end of Chapter fifteen. Unfortunately I can't describe this without spoiling the novel for you, nor can I say whether events get better or worse beyond this point, but you will be keen to find out.

As you can no doubt ascertain from the commentary above, I enjoyed this book very much indeed and unreservedly recommend it to you. Well worth getting. My only regret is that this book (and others by this writer such as ***The Death of Grass***) isn't getting the same exposure as Gollancz's SF Masterwork series choices.

Philip K. Dick - Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said
(Gollancz; 2001; B-pbk; 204 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-341-6; £6.99)

Reprint of a 1974 novel, one of the last few SF novels from this writer before his death. #46 in the SF Masterworks series.

E. R. Eddison - Mistress of Mistresses
(Gollancz; 2001; B-pbk; 401 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07284-9; £6.99)

Reprint of a 1935 fantasy. #21 in the Fantasy Masterworks series.

Simon Green - Shadows Fall
(Gollancz; 2001; A-pbk; 506 pp.; ISBN 0-575-05711-4; £6.99)
Fantasy novel.
Robert Harris - Fatherland
(Arrow; 2001; A-pbk; 386 pp.; ISBN 0-09-926381-5; £5.99)

Every now and then I get the urge to buy a book while browsing in a store – a rather foolish thing for me to do, given the pangs of guilt I experience when I look at the rows of unread books sent for review – but in this case I couldn't resist. This is because ***Fatherland*** is an alternate-world work where Nazi Germany won WWII and I've always had a weakness for these, from Keith Roberts' ***Weihnachtabend*** through Len Deighton's ***SS-GB*** and Sarban's ***The Sound of his Horn***, etc. This one stands shoulder to shoulder with the best.

Set in 1964 Berlin, it tells of an investigation into an apparent suicide by SS Sturmbannfuhrer Xavier March, a homicide police officer. Needless to say, things are not as straightforward as they seem and the more March discovers, the deeper his disillusionment with the state becomes. The ending, after a journey that leads him to, among other things, estrangement from his son, and documentation that details the Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution, is particularly poignant.

At the risk of straying off the topic at hand, I've noticed a number of references to the Wannsee Conference recently. The first was in Charlie Stross's serial; more recently, there has been a review of the historian Michael Rose's new book on the subject in the ***Sunday Times*** (***The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution***, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, ISBN 071399570X, £9.99) as well as the drama ***Conspiracy***, starring Kenneth Branagh and shown on BBC2. I've still to get hold of the book, but the drama is compelling viewing.

Anyway, in conclusion – and getting back to the novel – I found this a readable, engrossing work that successfully manages to combine and balance the strengths of a thriller, crime and alternate-world novel all in one. Well worth your time.
Robert Jordan - Winter's Heart
(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 691 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-071-7; £7.99)
Fantasy Novel. Book nine of 'The Wheel of Time'
Michael Moorcock - Gloriana, or The Unfulfill'd Queen
(Gollancz; 2001; B-pbk; 368 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07359-4; £6.99)
This is a 1993 revision of a 1978 fantasy novel. #22 in the Fantasy Masterworks series.

John Sladek - The Complete Roderick
(Gollancz; 2001; B-pbk; 611 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-340-8; £7.99)

Omnibus of two satirical robot novels, ***Roderick*** and ***Roderick at Random***. I have only read the first and found it uneven, with a slow start and unclear ending. However, the middle section is entertaining. #45 in the SF Masterworks series.

H. G. Wells - The Invisible Man
(Gollancz; 2001; B-pbk; 138 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-949-X; £6.99)

#47 in the SF Masterworks series.

Novellas

Alastair Reynolds - Diamond Dogs
(PS Publishing; 2001; B-pbk; 111 pp.; ISBN 1-902880-26-9; £8.00)

After a decade or so of publishing around one story a year we are very fortunate that Al Reynolds seems to have settled into a groove of producing one long novel and two or three novellas a year. Last year has already seen ***Glacial*** (published in these pages and due to be reprinted in both the Dozois and Hartwell 'Best of the Year' anthologies) and we now have his second entry, ***Diamond Dogs***. At 35,000 words this is his longest novella so far and, perhaps, his best.

The story tells of a group of characters (Roland Childe, Jonathan Swift, the latter's ex-wife Celestine, Dr Trintignant, Captain Forqueray and Hirz) who are assembled to go to a planet called Golgotha where an alien artefact known as the Blood Spire is located. This construct/organism is believed to hold something of immense technological value at its peak. However, the downside is that to get there the team have to pass through a number of chambers by solving increasingly complex mathematical problems which eventually force the survivors to resort to extreme bio-modification to keep up with the mental and physical demands. I say 'survivors' because failure at any of the tests results in increasingly harsh punishment, starting with one of the characters having a limb lopped off...

By the by, I have listed the characters involved above as this novella has the fall of Chasm City to the Melding plague in the distant background — this may be of interest to readers of his current novel, which, I believe, occurs around the same time.

This inventive and visceral novella is highly recommended.

Steve Aylett - Toxicology
(Gollancz; 2001; C-pbk; 131 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07110-9; £9.99)

This expanded version of a 1999 Four Walls, Eight Windows collection falls somewhere between B and C paperback formats. This edition adds six stories to the original twenty, and of the twenty-six, only seventeen have copyright acknowledgements. Perhaps some of these stories are original to the collection?

E. F. Benson - The Collected Ghost Stories of E. F. Benson
(Robinson; 2001; B-pbk; 624 pp.; ISBN 1-84119-432-8; £7.99)

Reprint of a 1992 omnibus edition of this writer's four ghost story collections.

Arthur C. Clarke - The Collected Stories
(Gollancz: 2001; B-pbk; 966 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-323-8; £9.99)

Paperback reprint of the huge hardback collection from last year.

Fritz Leiber - The Second Book of Lankhmar
(Gollancz; 2001; B-pbk; 695 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07358-6; £8.99)

Big omnibus volume of Leiber's 'Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser' work. This one (I haven't seen the first) contains ***The Swords of Lamkhmar***, ***Swords and Ice Magic*** and ***The Knight and Knave of Swords***. The first is the only genuine novel, I believe (the others are collections and/or fix-ups), although the last contains the novel-length ***The Mouser Goes Below***. Even so, portions of that one appeared in ***Terry's Universe*** and ***Whispers***. Nonetheless, it is probably no more episodic than any other modern doorstop fantasy, and likely less.

I haven't read much of the longer work in this volume, so can't really comment on the overall quality, although I would be surprised if I disliked this superior Sword & Sorcery series (I suspect it is called 'Heroic Fantasy' nowadays). In any event, I would suggest that any new readers start with the first volume, which includes the superior novella, ***Ill Met in Lankhmar***.

Original Anthologies

Philip Harbottle & Sean Wallace - Fantasy Annual 4
(Cosmos; 2000; C-pbk; 120 pp.; ISBN 1-58715-234-7; $12.00)

Yearly anthology (although I believe this series has gone quarterly as of last year) that contains short-story length work from Philip E.

High, David Somers, E. C. Tubb, Sydney J. Bounds (2), Adrian Cole, Cyril Wellington (2), B. J. Empson (2), Eric C. Williams (2) and John Russell Fearn.

Most of this group were regulars in the magazine *New Worlds* (at least until the end of Ted Carnell's editorship in 1964) and the anthology *New Writings in SF*, although most have been seen occasionally in other venues since.

Stephen Jones & David Sutton (eds.) - Dark Terrors 5
(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 562 pp.; ISBN 0575-07049-8; £12.99)

The latest entry in this anthology series is a huge volume with contributions from 31 writers. Chaz Brenchley, Eric Brown, Ramsey Campbell, David Case, Dennis Etchinson, Christopher Fowler, Gregory Frost, Mick Garris, Brain Hodge, C. Bruce Hunter, Gwyneth Jones, Caitlin R. Kiernan, Nancy Kilpatrick, Joel Lane, Roberta Lannes, Tanith Lee, Graham Masterton, Richard Christian Matheson, Kim Newman, Nicholas Royle, David J. Schow, Michael Marshall Smith, Brain Stableford, Peter Straub, Melanie Tem, William R. Trotter, Mary A. Turzillo, Lisa Tuttle, James Van Pelt, Cherry Wilder and Gahan Wilson.

I had promised myself that I would read this, but by now the paperback is also out so I suspect it's one I'll have to put aside for another day.

Reprint Anthologies

Gardner Dozois (ed.) - The Mammoth Book of Best New SF #14
(Robinson; 2001; B-pbk; 684 + 52 pp.; ISBN 1-84119-404-2; £9.99)

This year's volume has one standout story and that is Michael Swanwick's *The Raggle Taggle Gypsy-O*. This splendid, rich tale is perhaps most accurately described as the best story that Roger Zelazny never wrote. However, although this reminded me a little of *Damnation Alley* to begin with, it is much more than a Zelazny pastiche: the story is also about time-travel, archetypes and dead puppies being fed to dinosaurs! An utterly marvellous tale that was an original story added to a recent collection from this writer (*Tales of Old Earth*). An unwise choice, I think, as magazine publication and wider circulation would probably have resulted in its picking up several awards.

Strong work also comes from Ian MacDonald (*Tendeleós Story*, his 'Chaga' novella from PS Publishing), Lucius Shepard (*Radiant Green*

Star, his *Asimov's* novella, and welcome return to short fiction publishing) and Stephen Baxter (*On the Orion Line*, which would have probably been my choice for the Hugo but for Rusch's eventual winner, *Millennium Babies*).

Other good work comes from Charles Stross (*Antibodies*, from *Interzone*, the third story he published last year in addition to the two that saw print here. Note that his *second* story in this volume, *A Colder War*, comes from *Spectrum SF* as does Al Reynolds's *Great Wall of Mars*, also included.) Ursula K. Le Guin (*The Birthday of the World*), Nancy Kress (*Saviour*), Paul J. McAuley (*Reef*), Susan Palwick (*Going After Bobo*), Albert E. Cowdrey (*Crux*), Peter Hamilton (I enjoyed this *Interzone* novella, *The Suspect Genome*, too, but thought his PS novella, *Watching Trees Grow*, had a slight edge), Brian Stableford (*Snowball in Hell*), Greg Egan (*Oracle*), Tananarive Due (*Patient Zero*), Steven Utley (*A Real World* was a little too open-ended for me – I thought that a couple of his other 'Silurian' tales were stronger), and M. Shayne Bell (*The Thing About Benny*). The Le Guin, McAuley, Egan and Due stories also appear in the Hartwell *Best SF* (and the Swanwick in his *Best Fantasy*) so there may be additional commentary on these stories later.

Three stories struck me as OK this year, and these were from John Kessel (*The Juniper Tree*, an oddly low-key story to start the volume, I thought), Severna Park (*The Cure For Everything*) and Rick Cook & Ernest Hogan (*Obsidian Harvest*). Only two misses this year, and they were from Eliot Fintushel (*Milo and Sylvie*) and Robert Charles Wilson (*The Great Goodbye*, a squib from the science magazine *Nature* – see the Hartwell review below – whose 'surprise' ending is as nonsensical as it is weak).

My penultimate comments concern the availability of this year's volume. This proved problematic as not only did my review copy not turn up but only one of the stores I searched actually had any. I hope this is the result of a delayed release and not a more serious malaise.

Six stories from *Asimov's SF*, three from *F&SF*, two each from *Analog*, *Interzone*, *SciFiction* and *Spectrum SF*, plus another six from various sources. A good volume this year with few duds. Don't miss it and the Swanwick novelette!

David G. Hartwell & Kathryn Cramer - Year's Best Fantasy
(Eos; 2001; A-pbk; 492 pp.; ISBN 0-380-81840-X; $7.50/£6.99)

First entry in a welcome new anthology series. This volume contains

three very good stories from George R. R. Martin (*Path of the Dragon*, the self-contained novella from his 'A Song of Ice and Fire' trilogy noted last issue), Michael Swanwick (*The Raggle Taggle Gypsy-O*, discussed previously in the Dozois review) and Charles de Lint (*Making a Noise in This World*. This last novelette is set in the present day and tells of a delinquent Native American male, who, having just finished spray painting graffiti on railway carriages, comes across another member of his tribe who has been beaten and left to die in the desert. The dying man tells him who is responsible (a brutal local policeman) and, amongst other things, asks 'Don't let me be forgotten' and 'Be a warrior for me.' The young man goes off with rage in his heart to do this, but what's great about this story is how, although the warrior does what is asked of him, it doesn't evolve in the way that the reader expects. Convincing setting, too. A real find.

At the other end of the scale were the stories I didn't like, which included work by Brian Stableford (*Chanterelle* is too long a tale about a brother and sister lost in a wood, and one which refers far too often to other folk or fairy tales – I realise this is intentional, but I don't think it works. The final nail in the coffin is an ending that just doesn't seem to flow from the story. Disappointing, especially when his better *The Mandrake Garden* was published last year), Sherwood Smith (*Mom and Dad at the Home Front* is a twee if pleasant enough tale of a couple whose kids vanish into a fantasy land during the night. Unfortunately, the parents' eventual acceptance of these disappearances stretched and then snapped my credulity – not as painful as it sounds, thankfully), Don Webb (*The Prophecies at Newfane Asylum*, a Cthulthu tale, simply wasn't my cup of tea) and Zoran Zivkovic (*The Window*. Once again I will annoyingly second-guess the choice made here by pointing out that both *The Train* and *The Atelier* are, in my opinion, better stories).

OK work comes from Scott Bradfield (*The Devil Disinvests*), Simon Brown & Alison Tokley (*A Serpent in Eden*), Renee Bennett (*The Fey*), Richard Parks (*Golden Bell, Seven and the Marquis of Zeng*), Gene Wolfe (*The Walking Sticks*) and Terry Goodkind (*Debt of Bones*. This is reviewed in its own right above and only just creeps into this group. I must say that I wasn't impressed by the inclusion of this story. Not only is it not warranted on quality grounds, it was first printed in 1998! The introduction mentions the fact that the rights weren't available until now, but so what? This is either a volume of the best fantasy of

2000, or not. I might have cut this choice some slack if it was a work that wasn't going to see wider book publication, but this was never going to be a problem for Terry Goodkind – and the source anthology, ***Legends***, has already been out in mass-market paperback.)

OK, grumble over. The writers whose stories I enjoyed included John Sullivan (***Everything Changes***), Nicola Griffith (***A Troll Story***, which is actually not that successful as a story in terms of having a narrative arc, but works in other ways, such as its Norwegian setting, etc.), Storm Constantine (***The Face of Sekt***, an Egyptian fantasy), Sarah Singleton (***Ebb Tide***, the fantasy about the discovery of a dead mermaid which I enjoyed in ***Interzone***), Joel Lane (***The Hunger of Leaves***, a not bad Clark Ashton Smith pastiche), Nalo Hopkinson (***Greedy Choke Puppy***, a good Caribbean vampire tale which skilfully misdirects the reader. I've seen this writer's name mentioned favourably in several quarters, but this is the first story of hers I've seen: I look forward to seeing more.) Naomi Kritzer (***The Golem***, for the most part a strong tale about two women who raise a golem to protect themselves from Holocaust deportations in 1941 Prague. This would have been a very good work indeed but ultimately it stumbles a little, when the golem makes a sacrifice it doesn't need too. What's worse is that I think I can see an alternate and probably better ending. Best we all breathe a sigh of relief that it didn't cross my editorial desk!) Kain Massim (***Wrong Dreaming***, an Aboriginal magic fantasy), Robert Sheckley (***Magic, Maples and Maryanne***, a pleasant tale about elusive and unpredictable magic, or people's lives, or both) and Greg Costikyan (***And Still She Sleeps*** is a Sleeping Beauty variant in which a woman who has been placed under a spell in 745 AD is unearthed during an archaeological dig. Subsequently, a Professor of the Royal Thaumaturgical Society cannot undo the enchantment, and, in the meantime, one of the assistants on the dig becomes infatuated with her. The narrator observes his increasing agitation.)

In conclusion, I generally enjoyed this anthology and recommend that you pick it up. Even though the remarks above may hint at a mixed bag of stories, what is worth bearing in mind is that all the work here is *readable* to a greater or lesser extent, even the ones I didn't like or thought didn't work. Nearly all of them attempt to tell some sort of story, or have some other perceptible narrative arc, at or about the correct length. Perhaps, considering a minority of the work in the various 'Best SF' volumes, there is a lesson for SF writers here.

David G. Hartwell - Year's Best SF 6
(Eos; 2001; A-pbk; 500 pp.; ISBN 0-06-102055-9; $7.50/£6.99)

This year's entry in this series surprised me by having quite a number of stories that I hadn't seen (surprising, as I read a *stack* of 2000 genre magazines). However, on closer examination seven of these were reprints of 800-word or so short-shorts reprinted from a series the science magazine *Nature* commissioned last year. Perhaps I should deal with these first. Three I didn't care for, and these were from David Brin (*Reality Check*), John M. Ford (*In the Days of the Comet*) and Dan Simmons (*Madame Bovary, C'est Moi*). The first two are leaden nuggets of speculation, whereas the latter starts off with the neat idea of people transporting themselves to their favourite literary universe. Unfortunately, it soon drowns itself in quantum mechanical diarrhoea such as (p. 374):

> The human brain, it turned out, collapsed probability functions of this standing wavefront of consciousness the same way that an interferometer determined the quantum state of a photon or any other wavefront phenomenon. Using terabytes of qubit quantum data and applying relativistic Coulomb field transforms to these mind-consciousness holographic wavefunctions, it was quickly discovered that human consciousness could be quantum-teleported to points in space-time where entangled-pair wavefronts already existed.

Ah, the Emperor's new clothes... and this from a favourite writer, too.

One of the seven is OK (Ken MacLeod's *The Oort Cloud*, which makes a better job of the kind of thing the Brin and Ford were about). The remaining three are fairly good, I suppose, but minor. Norman Spinrad's (*New Ice Age, or Just Cold Feet?*) is an amusingish global-warming tale and 'Charles Dexter Ward' provides one (*Bordeaux Mixture*) about the fuss over genetic engineering, viewed from a future perspective. I would note that the third story, Joan Slonczewski's *Tuberculosis Bacteria Join UN*, while enjoyable, doesn't really offer anything more than Joe Patrouch's equally minor *Legal Rights for Germs?* (*Analog*, November 1977) did over twenty years ago.

Going beyond an examination of the individual stories I would have to say that I'm at a loss as to what any of this group are doing in an anthology of the year's best SF: they just aren't that noteworthy. Oh

well, as they only comprise twenty or so pages out of this substantial volume, let us move swiftly on to the rest.

Among the longer stories there are many good works, although I was surprised at how few struck me as either 'Wow' or 'Well, *that* wasn't bad!' stories this year. The only 'Wow' story in the book is, fortunately, also one of the longest and will probably be unseen for most of us outside North America (it appeared in a US original anthology about extinction, ***Vanishing Acts***, edited by Ellen Datlow). Ted Chiang's ***Seventy-Two Letters*** is a superior novella and one which David Hartwell accurately describes as 'alternate-science, alternate-history'. If you liked William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's ***The Difference Engine***, then you'll like this, except the science in this one is that of alternate-biology rather than computing. The problem at the core of the story is the limited number of generations of pre-formed spermatozoa left in human males, e.g. the potential extinction of mankind in a handful of generations from the Victorian era the story is set in (I said it was alternate-biology!) A clever and engrossing story that draws several interesting if other-worldly-scientific ideas together.

Other good work comes from the following (I've commented on a lot of these in previous issues so have tried to limit additional remarks to stories I have read for the first time): Paul J. McAuley (***Reef***, also in the Dozois, is a fairly exciting story about a science team on a habitat asteroid investigating a vacuum organism experiment that has been left untended in the Kuiper belt for some years), Robert Silverberg (***The Millennium Express***, rescued from ***Playboy***, tells of a group of famous clones – Einstein, Hemingway, etc. – destroying parts of a future Earth just before the next millennium), Tananarive Due (***Patient Zero***, her bio-scare story about a child in isolation), M. Shayne Bell (***The Thing About Benny***, another good story from the anthology ***Vanishing Acts***, this one about Abba the pop group and visiting large companies looking for endangered species of plants!), Howard Waldrop (***Our Mortal Span***, is a little similar in feel to Ellison's ***'Repent, Harlequin!', Said the Ticktockman***, in its lively story of one of the robots at a theme park – the troll, of course – running amok, enraged at how fairy tales and the like have been corrupted and ill-used), David Langford (***Different Kinds of Darkness***, the short story Hugo award-winner about BLIT-images and terrorism), Stephen Dedman (***The Devotee***, a convincing look at a near-future Australia and Caribbean, even if the last third of the plot is a tad slender), Ursula K. Le Guin (***The Birthday***

of the World), Greg Egan (*Oracle*), Stephen Baxter (*Sheena 5*), Robert Reed (*Grandma's Jumpman*, a young boy comes to terms with an alien who helps his grandmother), and Robert Charles Wilson (*The Dryad's Wedding*, an interesting story about a planetary, perhaps galactic, biological consciousness that is a prequel to the novel *Bios* – recently issued by Earthlight, and which I may now read).

The single OK story comes from Robert Sheckley (*The New Horla*, a story about a man who breaks his leg skiing and ends up in a lodge, whereupon a shining sphere manifests itself. Readable, but the tale subsequently segues to an incomprehensible ending).

The writers whose work I didn't enjoy or like, or which failed to work for me, included Brian Stableford (*The Last Supper*, one of his biology lectures posing as a story), Chris Beckett (*The Marriage of Sea and Sky*, a tedious story about a travel writer on an alien planet), Nancy Kress (*To Cuddle Amy*, an unconvincing squib about disposable children), Brian W. Aldiss (*Steppenpferd*, a tale about a monastery on an alien planet which just didn't work for me) Darrell Schweitzer (*The Fire Eggs*, OK for the most part, but I didn't think the ending of this story of 'Fire Eggs' arriving on Earth flowed from the logic of the rest of the story) and Michael F. Flynn (*Built Upon the Sands of Time*, which contains two of my pet hates: it's a bar story with equations).

There are seven stories from *Nature*, five from *F&SF*, two each from *Analog*, *Asimov's SF* (under-represented, I think), *Interzone* and the anthology *Vanishing Acts*, and one each from *Century*, *Eidolon*, *Playboy* and *SF Age*, and the anthologies *Skylife*, *Star Colonies* and *Black Heart, Ivory Bones*. The McAuley, Due, Bell, Le Guin and Egan also appear in the Dozois: more overlap than last year, but still fairly minimal in terms of pages (just over a quarter).

Compared with last year's volume there are about the same number of stories at either end of the quality spectrum: what's missing this year are those in the middle. That, and the lesser number of stand-out stories amongst the good ones. So: a mixed bag, but still worth getting – it would be for the Chiang novella alone.

Moving swiftly on, I'd like to continue my examination, started last issue, about whether or not Gardner Dozois and David Hartwell actually do catch all the 'Best of the Year'. Last issue I briefly examined how their choices matched up against the various award finalists lists (pretty good at short length, less well at longer ones). I don't intend to do that again this year, but will, instead, look at how their choices

compare to what *my* hypothetical 'Best of the Year' volume would have contained: there's nothing like nailing your colours to the mast, especially when you aren't under constraints of time, availability, money, room or actually having to do it!

As you would expect there is some common ground between the three of us. If I had room for a number of novellas, my choices would also include Ted Chiang's *Vanishing Acts* and Ian MacDonald's *Tendeleo's Choice*. Other novellas might include Lucius Shepard's *Radiant Green Star* (*Asimov's SF*), Linda Nagata's *Goddesses* (*SciFiction*) and Peter Hamilton's *Watching Trees Grow* (PS Publishing). Yes, I know: five novellas, but I did say this was unrestricted by reality!

Moving on to novelette lengths, I am amazed that a handful of stories were passed over by both editors. These include (in no particular order) Paul di Filippo's *Stink Lines* (*F&SF*), Bradley Denton's *Bloody Bunnies* (*F&SF*), Kristine Kathryn Rusch's *Millennium Babies* (*Asimov's SF*), James Patrick Kelly's *Feeling the Zaz* (*Asimov's SF*) and Dave Hutchinson's *Tir Na Og* (*SciFiction*). I, too, would have Stephen Baxter's *On the Orion Line*, Michael Swanwick's *The Raggle Taggle Gypsy-O*, and probably Ursula Le Guin's *The Birthday of the World*. To round this lot out I'd probably add Tom Purdom's *Sergeant Mother Glory* (*Asimov's SF*), Kate Wilhelm's *Earth's Blood* (*F&SF*), James Cambias's *The Alien Abduction* (*F&SF*) and A. R. Morlan's *Cine Rimettato* (*SciFiction*).

I note that the short story category is less problematic. The only two overlap choices I have are M. Shayne Bell's *The Thing About Benny* and Howard Waldrop's *Our Mortal Span*. I have little else to add apart from an alternate choice for Robert Reed, *Hybrid* (*F&SF*), much better than either of his two stories above, I think. I'd also choose a different one of Steven Utley's 'Silurian' stories: *Cloud by Van Gogh* (*F&SF*), although all three are fairly close in quality, so much so that I'd maybe use *The Despoblado* (*SciFiction*). Last but not least there's Jerry Oltion's *A Star is Born* (*Analog*) and maybe Stephen Baxter's *Cadre Siblings* (*Interzone*), if I had the space (joke). I haven't, for reasons of propriety included in the list above the three or four works I'd choose from *Spectrum SF*...

So, in conclusion, the two editors do a fairly good job of picking the best for the year but there are major omissions. It will be interesting to see if a new addition to the 'Best of the Year' anthology group, to be edited by Robert Silverberg, will help improve the situation.

Stephen Jones (ed.) - Vampire Stories by Women
(Robinson; 2001; B-pbk; 624 pp.; ISBN 1-84119-297-X; £6.99)

This theme anthology just fits into the 'reprints' section, given that just under half the stories have 2001 copyright dates and are therefore, I assume, originals. These include Mary A. Turzillo, Nancy Kilpatrick, Storm Constantine, Louise Cooper, Ingrid Pitt, Wendy Webb, Roberta Lannes, Gemma Files, Melanie Tem, Elizabeth Massie, Christia Faust, Gala Blau, Caitlín R. Kiernan and Gwyneth Jones.

The reprints come from Anne Rice, Poppy Z. Brite, Tanya Huff, Tina Rath, Freda Warrington, Nancy A. Collins, Elizabeth Hand, Janet Berliner, Yvonne Navarro, Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman, Lisa Tuttle, Chelsea Quinn Yarbo, Kathryn Ptacek, E. Nesbit, Tanith Lee, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Kushner, Pat Cadigan and Connie Willis.

Finally, there is also an original poem by Jane Yolen and an introduction by Ingrid Pitt.

Robert Phillips (ed.) - Nightshade: 20th Century Short Stories
(Robinson; 2001; B-pbk; 464 pp.; ISBN 1-84119-418-2; £9.99)

This is a shorter and more expensive book than usual from Robinson, which includes extra-genre stories from Rudyard Kipling, Franz Kafka, Shirley Jackson, Muriel Spark, etc.

Magazines

Asimov's Science Fiction - October/November 2001
(Large digest; 144 pp.; ISSN 1065-2698; £2.50/$3.50, 8-issue UK subscription $21.98 (~£15); Asimov's SF, PO Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80323-4625, USA; www.asimovs.com)

Headlining this almost double size anniversary issue (240 pp., $5.50) is a new novel by Robert Silverberg, ***The Longest Way Home***. Apparently this won't be out in hardback until the middle of 2002, so here is a chance to catch an early look at it. I'll review this one when I cover the January issue (which contains the last part).

Best fiction of the issue comes from Robert Reed and Michael Swanwick. Robert Reed's ***The Boy*** is yet another good novelette from this writer. This one is narrated by a woman in an alternate world where the relationship between the sexes is somewhat different. At the story's conclusion, Reed simultaneously manages not only to show us how different, but also wrong-foots the reader's expectations as to the assumed outcome. Clever stuff.

Michael Swanwick's story is light entertainment. In ***The Dog Said Bow-Wow***, the first of two main characters is Sir Blackthorpe Ravenscairn de Plus Precieux – 'Surplus' – a dog that has been neurologically and physically adapted, and is newly arrived in a strange future London. The other main player is a human called Darger. Together they set out on a caper centred on Buckingham Labyrinth (as the palace is called in this London). The following will give you a flavour of the place:

> A Dwarf savant was produced to lead them though the outer circle of the Labyrinth. They passed by ladies in bioluminescent gowns and gentlemen with boots and gloves cut from leathers cloned from their own skin.

and:

> His sharp eyes espied the remains of an antique electrical system, and traces as well of telephone lines and fibre optic cables from an age when those technologies were yet workable.

As he has done before, Swanwick manages to provide his science fantasy short story with a novel's worth of background.

There are several other good stories in this issue. Simon Ings' ***Menage*** is an 'if this goes on' story that looks at 24-hour soap opera TV. It's also quite a deceptive story and your perceptions of what is happening will change as you work your way through it. Initially, it seems like one of the soap stars has left the show and is staying with the director and his wife... William Sanders' ***When this World is All on Fire*** is a downbeat tale of an eco-catastrophe future and Native American reservations filling up with unwanted white refugees. The ending is fittingly downbeat. Andy Duncan's ***Lincoln in Frogmore*** is a story wherein Lincoln addresses a group of black people in South Carolina, colourfully narrated from the viewpoint of a young boy. A fantasy in two ways: Lincoln was, according to the endnote, never that far south, and the story also suggests the group he addresses know what his eventual fate will be. This is reprinted from his short story collection of last year, ***Beluthahatchie and Other Stories***, and is worth catching.

The other novelettes are by Charles Stross (***Troubador***, the second story in the sequence that started with ***Lobsters*** in the June issue), Steve Martinez and Allen M. Steele (***Liberty Journals***, the fourth of his 'Coyote' stories will be of interest to those, like me, that are following the series. However, this one reads like an extract from a longer work

and is not as self-contained as the first two); short stories by Cherry Wilder and Jack Williamson. The non-fiction contains an editorial by Robert Silverberg, a humorous piece on author introductions by Michael Swanwick and poetry. No book reviews, surprisingly.

Fantasy and Science Fiction - June 2001

(Digest; 160 pp.; ISSN 1095-8258; $3.50, 11-issue UK subscription $39.97 (~£28); Spilogale Inc., PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA; www.sfsite.com/fsf/)

There isn't much to note this issue, except maybe Albert E. Crowley's ***Tomorrow***, a pleasant if minor fantasy about a man visiting a Sybil (soothsayer) on the eve of the explosion of the Pompeii volcano.

The other stories (from Yoon Ha Lee, Allen Steele and Robert Thurston) are mostly OK, and I quite enjoyed Jack Dann's long novella ***The Diamond Pit*** for most of its length. This homage to F. Scott Fitzgerald (you don't need to have read ***The Diamond as Big as the Ritz***) has a 1923 aviator called Paul Orsatti shot down over the USA and imprisoned in the hideout of a phenomenally wealthy tycoon. This secret enclave is hidden in a mountain that is mostly one large diamond! Unfortunately, the tycoon's offstage actions at the end of the story aren't credible and, apart from that, it's too long for its story (71 pp.).

There are also the usual book and film reviews.

Fantasy and Science Fiction - July 2001

There are three items worth a look this month. The first of the novelettes, Steven Popkes's ***Tom Kelley's Ghost***, starts off telling the story of the eponymous Kelly and the brothel he builds in 1901. Later, the daughter of an ex-lover comes to work at the house and from then on in events take a more fantastical turn as he pursues her to town in order to rescue her from evil. This isn't 100% successful (the second half has a slightly woolly feel to events), but it will hold your attention. The other long novelette, Carolyn Ives Gilman's ***The Real Thing***, isn't perfect either, mainly due to a rather clumsy time-travel gimmick setup in the first few pages, but it soon overcomes this to tell an interesting story of a woman catapulted into the future where all information is bought and sold as a commodity, according to its worth to the general public and regardless of whether it is accurate or not. Information that no-one is prepared to buy can disappear... The story of the woman and a media mogul she starts a relationship with is told against this backdrop, and the media frenzy that it generates; the fact that this is also a slightly slushy romance merely adds some guilty pleasure!

The worthwhile short story is M. Shayne Bell's *Miss America at the Java Kayenko*. Initially, I wasn't convinced by this story's globally repressive and homophobic background, but the more the tale of two men trying to get off-planet to a more liberal Mars advances, the better it succeeds, and ultimately it is a work of note.

The other short stories are by Benjamin Rosenbaum, John Morressy and Lawrence C. Connolly, and there are the usual book and film departments and a science column.

Fantasy and Science Fiction - August 2001

This month's issue starts with Robert Reed. *One Last Game* tells of a number of couples on a lakeside holiday and is narrated from the POV of an adolescent teenage boy. At the midpoint of the story, the adults receive an (offstage) time-travel visit from the adult version of the teenager. The remainder of the story charts his reaction to this event, and, perhaps, the idea of predestination. Reed is at his best in these strongly characterised tales that revolve around a core sfnal idea.

Another notable work comes from Paul J. McAuley. *The Two Dicks* is an alternate world story that portrays the deceased Philip K. Dick as a successful mainstream writer. However, his paranoia is still there, and a visit to see President Nixon does nothing to reassure him...

Two other good, but more minor stories, come from the well-known actor Alan Arkin (*The Amazing Grandy* tells of an stage magician/ debunker meeting Jesus on a plane) and John Lagan (*On Skua Island* is a spooky, novelette-length 'Mummy' story set on a remote Shetland island, narrated at a dinner party by an archaeologist).

There is one other novelette from Ron Goulart (an OK 'Heather Moon' story) and shorts from Charles Coleman Finlay, Carol Emshwiller and Terry Bisson (*A View From the Bridge* is an OK 'if this goes on' story about hazardous sports reprinted from the webzine *Gorp*).

The book and film reviews contain an interesting and (to my mind) more balanced than usual article about e-publishing as well as reviews of several recent e-books. Even though I'm something of a sceptic about these, by the time you read this I may be the owner of a Pocket PC, as this article has helped to convince me to dip my toes in the water. Watch these pages for the results...

Fantasy and Science Fiction - September 2001

This issue is a special Kate Wilhelm issue and contains a new novella from her as well as a useful bibliography, and appreciation from the editor, Gordon van Gelder. The novella, *Yesterday's Tomorrows*, starts

off as a technical tour de force. A history teacher, Hal Whitcombe, picks up a female hitchhiker, Tilly Dunning. From their perfunctory conversational titbits, the story appears. Before long, we know that Tilly has left her job working as a geneticist because she found falsified results in the major experimental work that set her institute up. Matters take an even more sinister turn when it materialises that the man she was working for crossed paths with her scientist grandfather years before, around about the time that the latter died in a scandal. Tilly's grandmother always maintained that her grandfather's death was a setup, and that there were suspicious circumstances...

Around the halfway point the story collapses into the more familiar form of a murder mystery as Hal the history teacher starts to investigate, but only to a certain extent. We learn more about the grandmother: elements of predestination creep in as Tilly tells of her statements that Tilley would salvage her grandfather's reputation. The final scene is a little weak however – the villain's plan is unconvincingly contrived – but this is a minor weakness in what is otherwise an interesting work. Worth your time.

There are other short stories from Michael Kandel (this one, while OK, repeats the type of satire that Sheckley did much better in the 50s), Lawrence Miles, Alex Irvine, Robert Sheckley and Laird Barron.

Book review columns by Charles de Lint and Elizabeth Hand (an interesting essay on children's fantasy); film column by Lucius Shepard.

Fantasy and Science Fiction - October/November 2001

Best story in the annual almost-double-size issue (240 pp., $4.59) is Carol Emshwiller's ***Creature***. This was a pleasant surprise as I normally find Emshwiller's work rather opaque and impenetrable. However, ***Creature*** is a much more straightforward work that tells of an intelligent gengineered dinosaur fleeing from the organisation that created her. The dinosaur stumbles upon a man who lives in the woods and who gives her aid. The story is also narrated from his viewpoint. Interesting how both Emshwiller and Richard Chwedyk (***The Measure of All Things*** in the January issue), present modified dinosaurs with amenable, quiet characters. Although I don't have any problems with this angle, enjoyed it in fact, I think gengineered dinosaurs would be more likely to have the disposition of one of the ***Alien*** monsters with PMT... This is a sequel to ***Foster Mother*** in the February issue. I presume more stories are upcoming and look forward to them.

A number of other stories fall, more of less, into the 'quite good'

category. Ian Watson's novella, ***One of Her Paths***, tells of a spaceship journey through Q-space in the hope of colonising a planet in the Tau Ceti system. It quickly becomes a more complicated story with the introduction of material about an all-connecting human overmind and multiple quantum realities. Watson manages to juggle these complicated concepts better than most but the ending lost me a little. Poul Anderson's ***The Lady of the Winds*** is a longish novelette in the 'Thieves World' setting and tells of a bard trying to charm his way past a peeved wind goddess. (Sadly, this will be one of the last works from this recently deceased writer.) Albert Cowdrey's ***Queen for a Day*** is a picturesque murder mystery set in New Orleans. The two detectives on the case end up in a voodoo church attempting to work out what's been happening. Finally, Jack O'Connell's ***Legerdemain*** is another fantasy, this time about a young man, a strange meeting on a train, and his subsequent search for a book that is forced on him during the meeting but which subsequently vanishes. Again, I'm not sure I 'got' the ending.

The other fiction includes an OK 'Kedrigern' fantasy novelette by John Morressy, another novelette by James Morrow and short stories from Ray Bradbury, Gene Wolfe and Neil Gaiman. The non-fiction includes ***Plumage from Pegasus,*** humour from Paul di Filippo, and various other review columns. I'm embarrassed to say that, having previously stated that I thought the science columns were out of place in ***F&SF***, I enjoyed ***Under Pressure*** by Paul Doherty and Pat Murphy. What we would call 'application led' in the teaching profession, i.e. science that starts in the real world, and better for it.

Fantasy and Science Fiction - December 2001

This issue, like August's, starts with another novelette from Robert Reed (his fifth contribution to ***F&SF*** this year). ***Raven Dream*** tells of a seven-year-old boy who lives in a small, strange community that seems to be hiding from the rest of the world. For sure, they actively avoid other humans (apart from certain interactions with a couple of men who live just beyond an electrified fence). I liked this as far as it went, but it's obviously the first in a series of stories and it leaves a little too much unexplained for a stand-alone work.

The other two I thought fairly good were Robert Sheckley's ***The Quijote Robot***, a novelette that seems to be a robotic retelling or spin-off from Cervantes' ***Don Quixote*** (not that I've read the latter), and Thomas Disch's ***The Shadow***, a spooky tale of a shadow that takes over the life of an old woman.

There is one other novelette by Michael Blumlein (*Know How, Can Do* is clever and ambitious, but probably not entirely credible) and short stories from Walter Mosley (*Little Brother* is part of a forthcoming novel *Futureland)*, Pat MacEwen and Michael Libling.

The usual departments including a scathing review by Lucius Shepard of *A.I.* (but as he takes great exception to just about all of Spielberg's work, including *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan* among others, I feel this relegates his essay to the 'interesting but useless' category, along with Tolstoy on Shakespeare, Moorcock on Tolkien, Joshi on King, etc.).

Interzone #169 - July 2001

(Short A4; 64 pp.; ISSN 0264-3596; £3.00, 12 issue UK subscription £34; 217 Preston Drove, Brighton, BN1 6FL or at www.sfsite.com/interzone)

There's a welcome new novelette from Ian R. MacLeod in this month's issue, *Isabel of the Fall.* Perhaps a little slow to get started, it tells of a young woman, Isabel, who becomes a Dawnsinger, and her duties in a minaret on the world of Ghezirah, one of the Ten Thousand and One Worlds. Her duties include tending to one of the mechanical mirrors that bring light to this strange world (and this is another minor weakness of this work: the mechanics of the mirrors never seem that clearly drawn, but I suspect that won't be a problem for most in this type of story). She then meets another young woman and the relationship that develops leads to their fall. All of this is told almost as a myth, and it has a dreamlike progression that is effective. A story that will probably appear in the Best of the Year anthologies, I suspect, and, as with this writer's work generally, worth catching.

There are other stories by Neal Asher, Stephen Baxter, Matt Colborn, Mat Coward and Gwyneth Jones. The latter's *The Salt Box* is a mainstreamish tale that is OK as far as it goes, but is really the 'overture' (read: prologue) to a new novel, *Bold as Love.* The non-fiction includes an interview of Ian R. MacLeod by Nick Gevers and 'media commentary' by Evelyn Lewes, who also takes flak in the letter column for her one of her previous media columns.

Interzone #171 - September 2001

Two good stories this month from Leigh Kennedy and James Lovegrove. It took me a while to get into Kennedy's *Wind Angels*, but this story eventually grabbed me. It is set in a future England suffering from flooding, power shortages and the like, and tells of a woman

coming to terms with the end of one relationship and the start of another. James Lovegrove's ***Junk Male*** gives junk mail, email, text messages & etc. the 'if this goes on' treatment and entertainingly too.

There is also a novelette by Eric Brown and short stories from Zoran Zivkovic (second of the 'Seven Touches of Music' set), Gregory Benford and Ruaridh Pringle.

The non-fiction contains a full letter column, most of them complaining about Evelyn Lewes's media column (I usually skim it so can't really tell if they *are* ungrammatical or poorly researched. Who cares: does she have a point? I suspect that anyone else who dared to identify ***Dr Who***, ***Blake's 7***, ***Buffy*** and the like as the drivel they are would get an equally full mailbag). A welcome interview with Adam Roberts by Nick Gevers, and film and book reviews.

Interzone #172 - October 2001

There's a good story by Chris Beckett in this issue. ***Marcher*** manages to successfully combine the disparate elements of an immigration officer at work in a futuristic sink-estate and people using shifter pills to vanish to multiple worlds. ***Interzone*** is perhaps at its best when presenting tales like this one and Alexander Glass's ***The Watcher's Curse*** (***Interzone*** #162, December 2000). Original works of a type that can't be found in the American magazines (this is not to say that original work doesn't appear in the US magazines, but not *this* type).

Three of the other stories, from Carolyn Ives Gilman, Barrington Bayley, and Tony Ballantyne are also quite good until their endings let them down to a greater or lesser extent. Carolyn Ives Gilman's ***The Invisible Hand Rolls the Dice*** tells of a man in a futuristic world dominated by marketing on his way to an arranged marriage. The ending, however, is inexplicable. Barrington J. Bayley's ***Domie*** is a quirky, vivid story about an alien dominated Earth where mankind has taken the place of the domestic hen in the alien foodchain. A captured wild female bullies a domesticated male into escaping. The problem with this one is that it coasts to a stop rather than ending properly. A pity he hadn't kept on writing, but maybe there will be a sequel. Finally Tony Ballantyne's ***Indecisive Weapons*** is a comic work about a man who is targeted by limited-radius sub-nuclear warhead sent by Indian villagers. The story entertainingly tells of his attempts of evade this and find out why it was sent. Weak ending, though.

There are three other stories by Henry Wessells, Zoran Zivkovic (third in a new set of stories) and Lisa Tuttle. The latter's ***A Cold Dish***,

reviewed favourably here last issue, is reprinted from the *SciFiction* website (November 2000).

The usual non-fiction includes an interview of Ian MacDonald by Nick Gevers. Also, Evelyn Lewes, *Interzone*'s media commentator, takes yet more flak in the letter column.

Web Fiction

SciFiction #9 - January 2001

The first two of this month's stories both get off to rather tottering starts, beginning as they do with material peripheral to the main narrative thread, although this is less pronounced in Paul di Filippo & Bruce Sterling's *The Scab's Progress*. Here, the story starts with underground TV footage of a 'scab' (bio-hacker) hero called Ribo Zombie on some heist, but we don't realise this isn't the main thrust of the tale until a couple of pages later. At this point the central character turns out to be another scab, Fearon McClanahan. The story proper starts when an industrial biological accident looks like an opportunity for McClanahan and his sidekick Malvern Brackhage (accompanied by their gengineered 'familiars', Weeble the pig and Spike the weasel) to make the killing of a lifetime. In the story's defence, Ribo Zombie does reappear later on.

What I haven't said yet is that this is an inventive, original and wacky story, and their subsequent travels to Cuba, and by dirigible to darkest Africa are most entertaining. The temptation to quote chunks is difficult to resist. Such as this at the scene of the biological accident:

> The Mixogen executive had died at her post. She sprawled before her desktop in her ergonomic chair, still in her business suit but reeking of musk and decay. Her swollen, veiny head was the size of a peach basket.
> Fearon closed his dropped jaw and zipped up his Kevlar vest. "Jeez, Malvern, another entrepreneur-related fatality! How high do you think her SAT got before she blew?"
> "Aw, man - she must have been *totally* off the IQ scale. Look at the size of her frontal lobes. She's like a six-pack of Wittgensteins."

Or later on:

"Once we get our hands on that wodge of extinct gene-chains, our names are forever golden! It'll be vino, gyno, and techno all the way!"
"Let's not count our chimeras till they're decanted, Mal.

I suspect this all owes more to di Filippo than Sterling, but make sure you catch it (and the fifty-word glossary) in any event. Remember this is on the web and *free*.

The second story, Michael Cassutt's ***More Adventures on Other Planets***, is also hampered by its beginning and would be much better without the first seven or so paragraphs and their waffle about movies, and an officer and woman meeting in the Soviet Embassy, especially as we are immediately catapulted onto the surface of Europa, one of the moons of Jupiter. This one subsequently develops into quite a good story about an older man and woman meeting on Earth at a telecontrol station in California, and the machines they operate on Europa, until an abrupt ending which spoils it somewhat (and the elegiac last sentence doesn't save it).

Another fairly good (although perhaps equally flawed) story is Richard Bowes's ***The Quicksilver Kid***. This is a pleasant read about a cross-dressing, world-jumping young woman and her involvement in a politician's life. I wonder, though, if the story doesn't rather undercut itself at the end, when she solves a problem that she herself created.

There's one other original story this month, from Susan Palwick, and two good reprints. Zenna Henderson's ***Something Bright*** (***Galaxy***, 1958) and Harlan Ellison's Hugo award-winning, ***I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*** (***Worlds of If***, 1967). The Henderson is an interesting work in that its slight storyline (of a girl keeping a peculiar woman company overnight) pays off so well. Perhaps this is because of the tantalising glimpse of the other world it offers, or that it is so readable, in the way that, for example, Stephen King's work can be.

SciFiction #10 - February 2001

This month's offerings include the welcome return of Barry B. Longyear. Longyear, if I recall correctly, was critically much maligned in the late seventies and early eighties when he first appeared in ***Asimov's SF*** with his 'Baraboo' stories. I never really understood why, as they were honest (and readable) enough pulp stories about the descendants of a crashed circus spaceship that I mostly enjoyed. A later award-winning novella, ***Enemy Mine***, I thought even better.

So, without further ado, what of *Silent Her?* Well, those of you who (perhaps, like me) were expecting the guilty pleasures of another pulp potboiler will be disappointed. This novella is a rather low-key, mature and considered work that tells of a mute girl's life in what would seem to be an off-Earth colony whose laws and customs are based on one of the more fundamentalist Muslim regimes. This latter aspect gives the work a frisson it didn't have when it was published pre-9/11, but it would still be a worthwhile read without it. Needless to say, the girl is going to be an instrument of change in this culture and the novella charts the first few steps she takes in this direction. Which leads me neatly to one of its weaknesses: it is rather open-ended, reading like the first section of a novel-length work. Perhaps we will be lucky enough to see further episodes posted. One other weakness: it'll take you a few pages to get into this one as the beginning is rather opaque, and should have been rewritten or shortened.

The two (good) reprints are (or were) *Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons* by Cordwainer Smith, an 'Instrumentality' space opera in which a thief tries to get past Norstrillian defences, and *The Mindworm* by Cyril Kornbluth, a tale of psychic vampirism. As of late-December the Smith had been removed from the site (it appears that the reprints are only posted for a limited time).

SciFiction #13 - May 2001

Ian MacLeod makes a welcome second appearance in 2000 (see the July *Interzone* above) with a new novella, *New Light on the Drake Equation*. This is an account of Tom Kelly, an astronomer who is involved in SETI work, and the rambling narrative tells his life-story while engaged on this, and of a woman, an ex-lover, who visits the older man in the present day. In the background are interestingly described facets of mid-21st-century life, such as humans growing wings for hang-gliding.

In some respects this work reminded me a little of Keith Roberts' *Drek Yarman*, inasmuch as the narrative is largely about the life and experiences of one person, encapsulating the loss and the waste, but also the hope and the joy. However, there is a possible uplifting occurrence at the end that relates to his work (to say any more would maybe spoil it for you). I guess you either like this sort of character-driven material (like me), or you don't, but I'd suggest you give this one a try.

The two reprints this month are Harry Harrison's odd *Beyond the*

Falls (*If*, 1970), which the author's afterword ascribes to a dream (or 'vision') and largely has that feel (you'll either love this one or be perplexed by it), and Fredric Brown's initially spooky but eventually sfnal *The Hat Trick* (*Unknown Worlds*, February 1943).

SciFiction #17 - September 2001

This month's offerings include *AZTECHS*, a worthwhile novella by Lucius Shepard which is a lucky curate's egg of fairly good to very good parts. Set on a future US-Mexican border which is delineated by a hundred foot high laser fence, events centre on a small-time fixer, Eddie Poe, who escorts a representative of the AZTECHS Corporation to a meeting with the criminal (and psychotic) Carbonell Cartel. All of which would be interesting in itself, but I should add that Poe is accompanied by his media flackette mistress and a group of 'Sammys' – samurai drug-addicted ex-veteran mercenaries. Also, the AZTECH Corporation is a front for an American military AI which has escaped over the border and now promises an afterlife for its followers…

There's enough bright, kinetic material in this to make it worthwhile reading for anyone, but towards the end it segues into a section on afterlife/eternity that tends to the ineffable. Which is fine – it's just that this final part fades like a dream when you are finished reading.

There are two reprints this month, both of which are worth catching. Theodore Sturgeon's *The Other Celia* (*Galaxy*, March 1957) has a rather open ending, but is such a bizarre, strange tale that you won't mind. A man's most unusual prying on the other people renting rooms in the same house as him unearths something even more unusual in the behaviour of a young woman. The other reprint is from the much-missed Bob Shaw. *Light of Other Days* (*Analog*, August 1966) is the first of his 'Slow Glass' stories, and was, I believe, the runner-up for that year's Hugo Award.

Non-fiction

Stephen Baxter - Omegatropic

(BSFA; 2001; B-pbk; 160 pp.; ISBN 0-9540788-0-2; £8.00)

A collection of non-fiction essays from various sources published to support the British Science Fiction Association. Given this worthy cause, you think that the BSFA might have squeezed an advert for themselves into the last page. The only information is on p. 4: BSFA, 1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry, Northants, NN11 3BE.

Stephen King - On Writing
(NEL; 2001; B-pbk; 367 pp.; ISBN 0-340-82046-2; £6.99)

Paperback edition of 2000 hardback that would, on initial impressions, appear to be a book on writing. It's actually something more complicated than that though: a three-part book where King gives us a potted autobiography (*C.V.*); his thoughts on writing (*Toolbox* & *On Writing*); and an short section detailing his near-fatal encounter with a van in 1999 (*On Living: A Postscript*).

How much use the book is as a guide to writing I don't know (although some of the instruction will be helpful), but it certainly illuminates how King himself creates, and is a worthwhile buy for those interested in his fiction and life. It was certainly unsettling to find out just how close King was to being killed in the accident described in the last section.

The book also has some supplementary material including the winning story from a contest, *Jumper* by Garrett Addams, which is not bad (and, like King, I didn't see the ending coming).

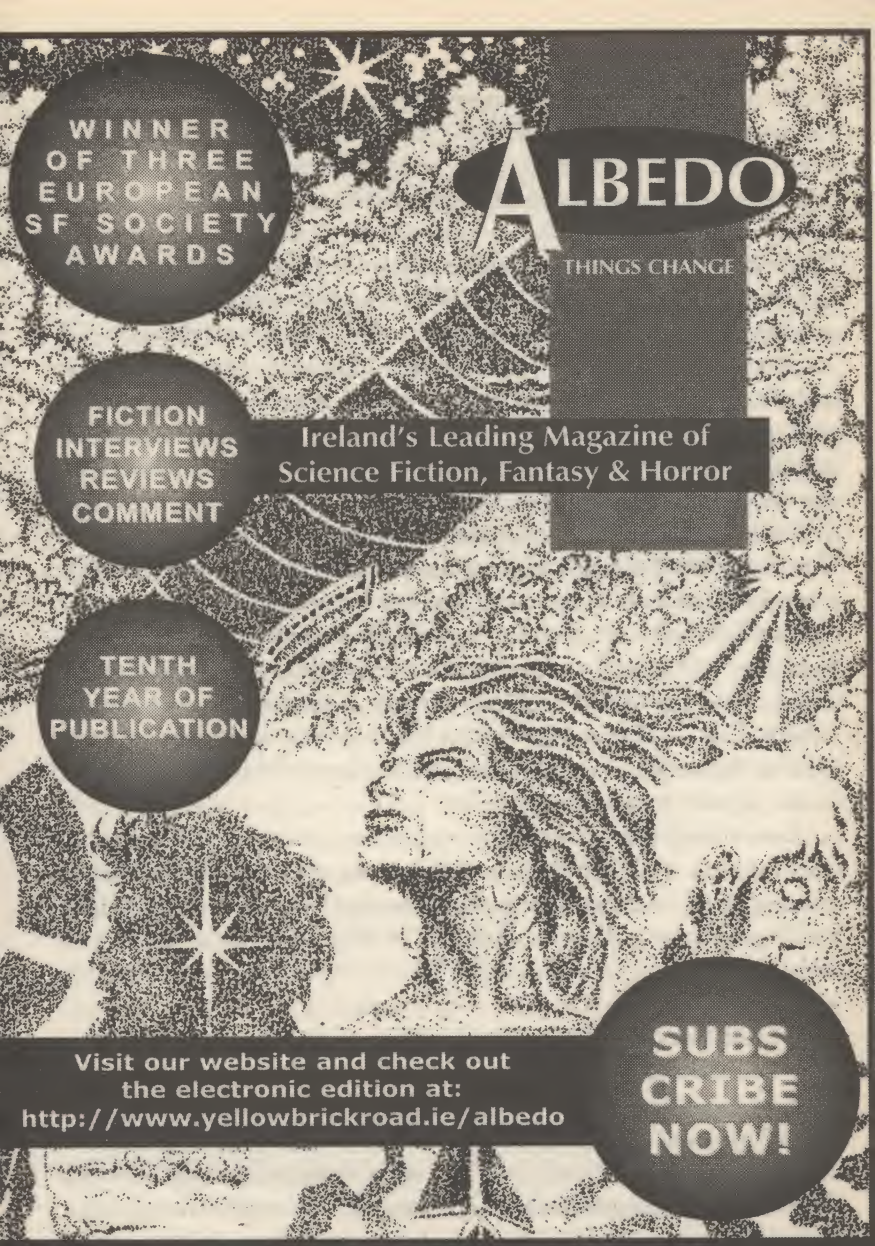
Artwork

Fred Gambino - Ground Zero
(Paper Tiger; 2001; Large; 112 pp.; ISBN 1-85585-891-6; £20)

If you liked the cover for *Spectrum SF* #7 (on p. 87 here) you should get hold of this. The dominant images here, like the Moore, are faces and spaceships. Indeed, if you like either of these artists, it is worth checking out the other. Foreword by Dick Jude and commentary by various other writers.

Chris Moore - Journeyman
(Paper Tiger; 2000; Large; 128 pp.; ISBN 1-85585-849-5; £20)

If you ever see a striking photo-realistic face on the cover of a SF book, chances are it's by Chris Moore (if it isn't by Fred Gambino - see above). A good collection of work from the cover artist for many of the SF Masterwork collection books. It includes some genuinely breathtaking images. The introduction and interview is by Stephen Gallagher. ●



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Letters

Spectrum SF #6

You're a cruel man. I was intending to pay the bills today and generally organise my life, when ***Spectrum SF*** #6 popped through the letterbox. All my good intentions went right out of the window. I thought, 'I'll just browse through it, see what's worth reading later,' but alas, whatever glue it is you use in the binding is very good. Several stories later I was still on the settee and no matter how I tried, I couldn't shake the magazine from my hand. In fact, I should be at work now. Thankfully I work in academia.

I don't usually read every piece of fiction in a magazine – in particular I'm not overly fond of long pieces – but instead start on the shorter ones. I've read these in this issue, and ***Instructions for Surviving***... and ***Luna Classifieds*** were both fun to read. I read the former very quickly, enjoying it as I went, but dreading that the last line would be something like '...and it was all just a game'. Thank goodness both you and the author, Eric Brown, are too canny for that. Eric is doubly canny in getting the reader to care about a character, even when that character is not directly present in the prose.

Luna Classifieds was very clever also, in presenting a world indirectly. The adverts were hilarious and far more effective than a dreary travelogue of the future. Does this mean that I am truly a child of the MTV generation? Likewise, ***First To The Moon!*** was just so funny with some corking images: riding to the 'bloody moon' on a 'five-thousand-ton firecracker', the RN pilot with his pipe in his mouth. It was so Dan Dare, but quite bleak, like Dan Dare if there had been a détente with the Mekon; fantastic. *(I thought that it ended up as quite a dark story. In fact, one of the things that I liked was the way it started off as a 40s SF story and ended as a 00s one – PF)*

Spectrum SF is the only mag I've subscribed to for a while,though I have recently re-subscribed to ***Interzone***. I've not read any other science fiction magazines in a long time, partly because they can be hard to get hold of, but also because, when I did manage to find some, the stories were technically proficient, but too often dull. *(Steady! You'll find a lot of good work in several other magazines and anthologies, as I regularly point out in The Archive – PF)* What impresses me most about

Spectrum SF is that there are enough novelties in the stories so that I feel that good old sense of wonder, but there's also enough about the characters so that I care about what happens to them. You've got a great eye for spotting the pieces that bring these two aspects, novelty and empathy, together. So far in this issue there's a good mix of styles that keeps me interested: classified ads, computerised instructions, straightforward narrative. In fact, with the mix of styles and content, plus the humour and your new skiffy cover, I think that this issue of *Spectrum SF* could be an important one for breaking into the American market.

Do you have any plans to go bimonthly at all? (Personally, I'd find another monthly just too intimidating: that sense of moral obligation, that pressure to read.) *(Doubtful. I've gone for an increase in size as being the better option, for a number of reasons – its cheaper to print four big books rather than six slimmer ones, the postage costs are less, etc. – PF)* One suggestion in case you do increase the frequency is to reprint, say, one piece per issue of recent fiction from overseas. I'm sure there must be equivalent magazines to *Spectrum SF* in other countries, but us Brits generally don't get to see them. I'm all in favour of cherry picking if the cherries are ripe. *(I'm not keen on reprints. I think that other English language magazines can be got hold of relatively easily. If you want them... – PF)* You could also expand the review section and perhaps include the occasional opinion/critical piece. Whatever you decide, don't change anything if the magazine will deteriorate. I'd rather have *Spectrum SF* once a quarter than Burger 'n' Fries SF every month. *(McSpectrum SF? Now that would be a proper Scottish title... – PF)*

Anyway, keep up the good work.

Sean Wilcock

Various

Well lucky I looked at the envelope. I think you are in danger of losing subbers by accident. How about a reminder? *(I do send reminders out. But only after subscriptions expire and once a new issue is available - PF)* Anyway is it really 4 issues since I started subbing to *Spectrum SF?* I read very little long SF now, whereas I'm reading lots of short fiction.

I like the colour covers – certainly necessary to pick up browsers in bookstores. For me the size is perfect. It seems I may have to work in London next year so something that slips in a jacket pocket is ideal for me. The same is true if I'm on holiday.

Good to see ***The Archive*** at a large size two issues running: it's the type of thing I turn to first. I prefer short fiction reviews. Novels get plenty of space elsewhere. (*I think you have articulated what seems to have been a tendency anyway. I'll try to have a look at three or four likely novels an issue, but otherwise will concentrate on short fiction - PF)*

I don't think the fiction quality of #5 & #6 was as high as the best of the earlier issues – still very readable though. That said, ***Spectrum SF*** is as good as any other magazine I sub to. Including ***F&SF*** or ***Asimov's SF***. I'd suggest you need to get a wider variety of writers. Yeah easier said than done I suppose. (*There are two names new to Spectrum SF this issue - PF)* How about trying to get an interview or do a feature on a writer and see if they'll send you a story? One way of getting a Connie Willis or a Michael Swanwick I suppose. Probably a naff idea; just a thought.

Not sure about serialising the Stross novel over two issues. It smacks of not having enough stories to fill an issue. (*The length of the Stross precluded completing it in this issue - PF)*

Best writers? Reynolds is very good. Stross is also someone I've mostly enjoyed. The Eric Brown stuff is also very enjoyable. The Christopher serial was very readable even if I found the politics a tadge unbelievable.

For some reason I don't think you can get ***Realms of Fantasy*** over here. I don't think they have an overseas sub rate. Martins newsagents used to stock it; WH Smith's or Borders may be able to order it for you.

Cheers,
Pete Duxon

(*Letters are welcome and should be sent to the address on page 2. They may be edited for space, spelling, punctuation, etc. If you don't want your comments published please make it obvious, although I'll still be glad to hear what you have to say – PF)*

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Next Issue

The next issue will be dated July 2002 (but hopefully available at the end of June) and will contain the (long-awaited!) conclusion to Charles Stross's The Atrocity Archive.

I also have novelettes on hand from Eric Brown (another 'Kethani' novelette, Thursday's Child) and David Redd (Solus, a long novelette in his 'Senechi' sequence – The Frozen Summer, Brother Ape, Moon Pearls, etc. – but complete on its own).

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